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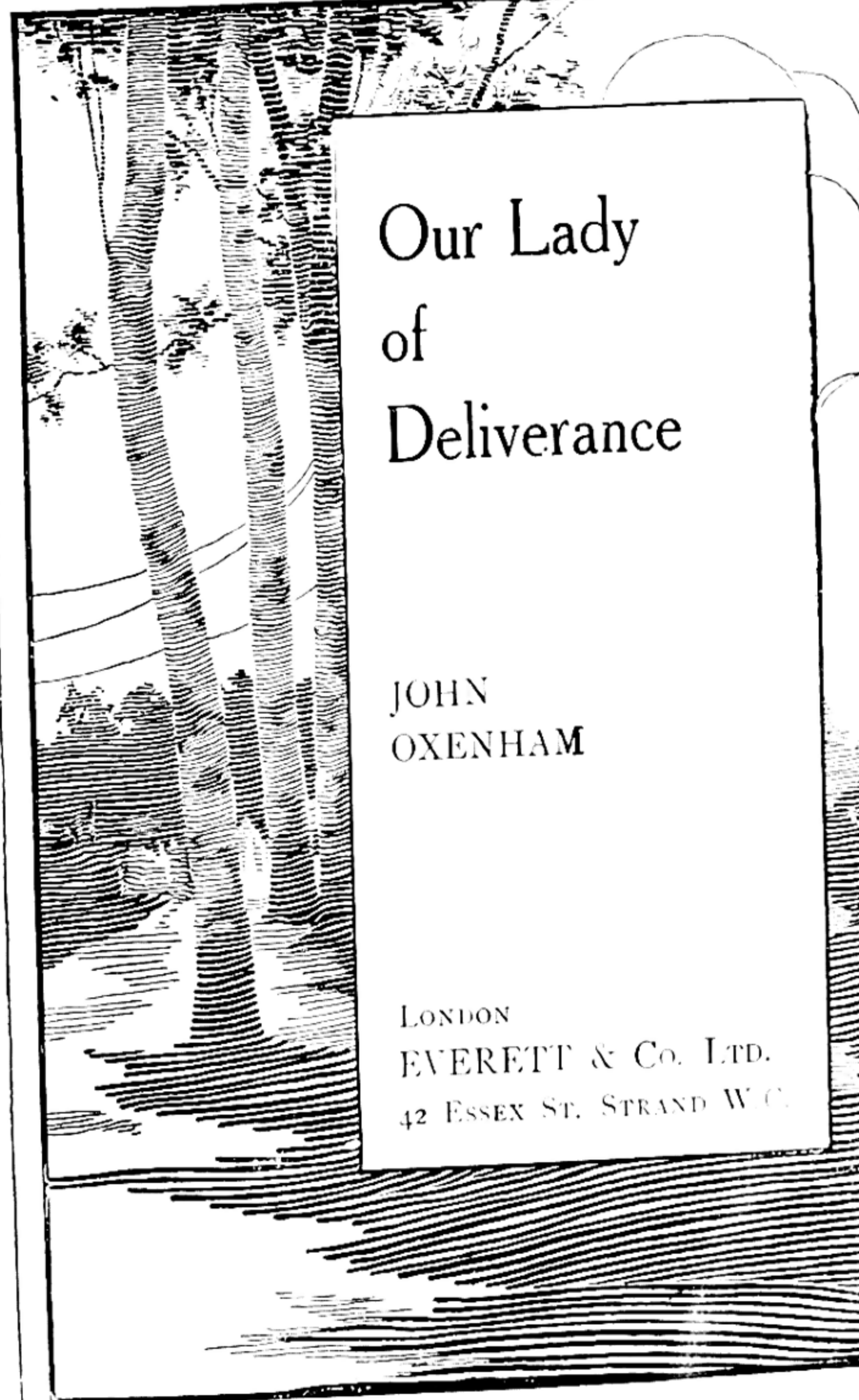
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OUR LADY OF DELIVERANCE

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Our Lady of Deliverance

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OXENHAM

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NOVELS BY JOHN OXENHAM.

GOD'S PRISONER

RISING FORTUNES

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UNDER THE IRON FLAIL

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WHITE FIRE

THE GATE OF THE DESERT

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THE LONG ROAD

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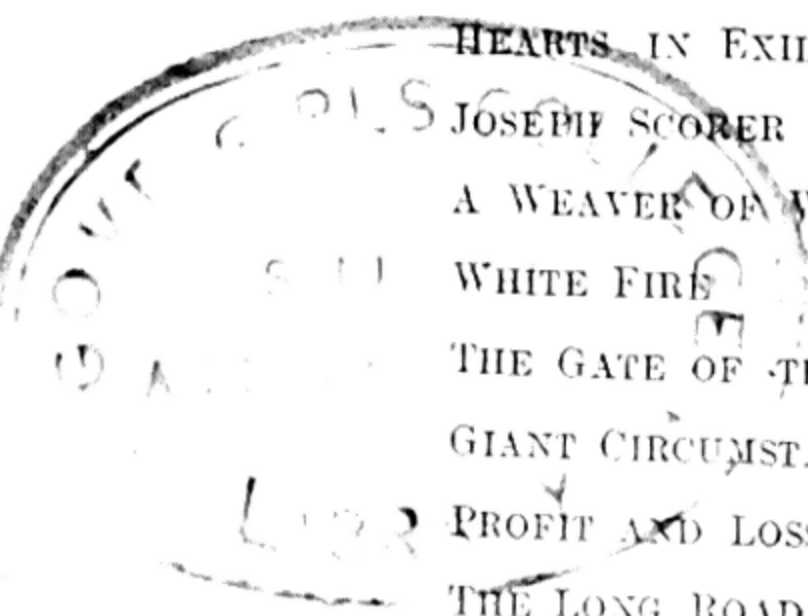
LAURISTONS

THE COIL OF CARNE

THEIR HIGH ADVENTURE

QUEEN OF THE GUARDED MOUNTS

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Our Lady of Deliverance

CHAPTER I

HOW I JUMPED INTO FORTUNE

IF I were a believer in stars and omens and such things I should certainly have the best of reasons for saying that I was born under the luckiest and brightest of both. For the two events in my life that have had most to do with guiding it into happy channels were matters of pure—chance?—good luck?—I prefer to thank something less impalpable and more thankable.

I spent many years on the sea, you see, and no man with brains in his head and a heart inside him can do that without coming to the knowledge that chance and luck are not the powers that be, hide it as he may under a mask of carelessness. Intimacy with the elements provokes no contempt, but a profound consciousness of personal insignificance which makes towards reliance on a higher power, and if we call it luck or chance, that is because we have British blood in our veins and don't talk much of those other things.

I was the youngest fourth officer of my year in the Cunard Service, and again the youngest third and the youngest second—possibly, if no one younger had turned up in the meantime, I might in due course have become the youngest captain, but that happened which changed all my life and turned it otherwise.

My mother died while I was still very young. My

father, before he followed her, gave me a good education at Merchiston, near Edinburgh, and when I joined the service that soon told.

The first of my fortunate happenings occurred during my fourth voyage with Captain Hains on the *Servia*.

I was leaning over the stern railing one evening chatting with a friend and waiting for the dinner bell to ring, when a shout from amidships startled us and as I glanced over the rail I saw a white face slide past in the green-white scethe of the ship's wake. It was purely a matter of instinct to rip away the life-belt that hung at the rail, and with it on my arm to spring out as far as I could in the direction of the face. I was a good swimmer and came up with it with little difficulty. I slipped the belt over the head of the drowning man, as I found it to be on closer acquaintance, and waved my hand to the boat that was already making towards us.

In ten minutes from the time my foot kicked off the stern railing we were on board again, and the *Servia* was under full steam trying to make up for those lost ten minutes, which, by the way, cost the man overboard the pool on the run next day. However, if anyone could afford to lose the pool it was he.

His name was Ephraim Sandbacker, and he came from California. He was a very quiet, unpretentious old soul, and he was worth twenty million dollars but that I only learned later. For some days I was almost afraid to show face on deck, so overpowering to a naturally reserved and modest man, were the remarks of the passengers, especially the American girls, who, I believe, took a special and perversely delight in covering me with confusion.

However, they gradually calmed down and let me go about in peace and free from blushes.

Old Mr Sandbacker said very little, but he wrung my hand very gratefully while he held my eyes wi

his, which were very bright and somewhat moist. All he did say was, 'You'll never be sorry to think you lengthened an old man's life, my boy.'

And I said, 'No, sir, but anyone else would have done the same.'

Practically nothing more passed on the subject. The old gentleman was always very friendly and pleasant, and would, I think, have been more so but that I always had a fear when he got me alone that he was going to offer me a reward for saving his life.

As I said, our little swim did not occupy ten minutes, but those ten minutes were the ten most fruitful minutes of my life. I doubt if any Rothschild ever coined money more rapidly. And that jump from the stern rail of the *Servia* was for me a jump into a new life, though at the time I did not know it.

Just twelve months later the bag which came out by the tender at Queenstown brought me a letter from a firm of solicitors in Liverpool. It was brief and to the point.

'DEAR SIR,—We are advised by Messrs Lock & Steele of Los Angeles, California, that under the will of their late client, the Hon. Ephraim Sandbacker, you are entitled to the sum of one million dollars, and they hold same to your orders. Your instructions will have our immediate and careful attention.—We remain, Dear Sir, yours faithfully, LAYTON & SON.

HUGH LAMONT, Esq.,

'S.S. *Servia*.'

I got such a shock at the first reading of that letter that it took two more readings to get the sense of it to me. Then I took it along to the captain and put it into his hand. He read it through carefully, and then his dear old face lighted up with gladness and he wrung my hand lustily.

'I'm heartily glad, my boy,' he said. 'I knew the

old chap would never forget, and he hasn't, but it's not every man would have remembered to such an extent. Pity after all,' he said quietly, 'here's another good sailor spoiled. I suppose—?' and he looked at me with whimsical wistfulness.

'No,' I said; 'I think I'll have a stroll on dry land. My only regret will be leaving you, sir. I never want to sail under a better man.'

'We shall miss you,' he said.

I forgot to ask him to say nothing about it, and it was all over the ship inside an hour, and once more I was put to the blush at the congratulations which rained upon me.

And so, at the age of twenty-eight, endowed with the best of health and spirits, my fortune was made by no grace of my own, but by, let us say, a happy accident and the generous remembrance of a grateful old man.

CHAPTER II

MDLLE. X.—HER PORTRAIT

For two years I roamed to and fro over the wide world, visiting in that time nearly every country that had ever in any way appealed to my heart or my imagination.

Foreign lands had always had a fascination for me, and now that in this wonderful way I was able to indulge my fancy I did so with the keenest enjoyment. Time and money were alike no object. I had no ties to keep me at home, and I was free to go whithersoever the spirit led me, and the spirit led me far and wide and with a trend towards the unbeaten tracks of travel. First I crossed back to America, sailing as a passenger on my old ship the *Servia*, I think I may

say, without any conceit, to the great satisfaction of my good friend the captain. We had great times together, and we tramped the deck and the bridge for hours, with, in the case of one of us at all events, an enjoyment which had never been there before.

The very fact of travelling as a passenger where hitherto I had been a servant and an official was in itself an enjoyable novelty and had in it many elements of amusement. My old friends among the crew were constantly mixing up my new position with the old one and coming to me with reports and so on, and then backing off with a grin and a turn of the tongue in their cheeks which always started us both laughing.

After a run through Canada and the States I crossed to California and visited Los Angeles. The only representative of Mr Ephraim Sandbacker was his widow, an old lady of seventy, who, when she knew who I was, could not find large enough expression for her good feelings towards me. She would have had me settle down 'right there,' and become a son to her old age, but the travel fever was hot in my veins, and after a delightful visit I only got away by promising to come back and see her again when I was ready to settle down for good and all, if that time ever came.

Then, through South America and the lovely islands of the Pacific, I wandered up to Japan, where I lingered long. Then to Australia, India, Egypt, Asia Minor, and so to Europe, and so at last to Paris and all that waited me there and afterwards.

Paris charmed me greatly, and the debt I owe to her will never be fully paid, for she proved the gateway to those very strange experiences through which I was to attain to all that I hold highest in my life.

One fateful day I rambled into the Salon. I was no judge of pictures, and my taste was no doubt

hopeless, but I knew when a picture pleased me, and out of such I was able to get much enjoyment.

It seemed to me a very clever show, if slightly eccentric here and there, and I was passing somewhat inattentively through the last room, my eyes surfeited with the masses of colour on which they had already feasted, when I stopped short, with a catch of the breath and a thrill like an electric shock, at the glance of a pair of eyes that caught mine and held them captive.

I had seen many beautiful women in my time, but I had never seen anything within measurable distance of the lovely face that looked calmly into mine from that curiously-carved, dead-white frame on the wall.

It was the face of a girl, the most exquisitely-beautiful face I had ever seen, the incarnation—say rather an inspiration—of all that is sweet and pure and good, and altogether lovely. As I stood gazing at it a voice behind me said triumphantly in French,—

‘Fair—one!’

And another voice cried argumentatively, ‘Not at all! Dark—one!’

Then the dispute, whatever it was, was taken up by other voices, and a wordy *mêlée* ensued, to which I paid no attention, because, in the first place, it was as unintelligible to me as the chattering of many parrots, and because, in the second place, my thoughts were given entirely to that lovely face before me. Was it a portrait, or only the idealisation of a master hand and brain?

I turned to the catalogue.

‘No. 1001—Portrait of Mdlle. X. . . . Louis Bidard.’

That left the point undecided. But the one thing certain was that never in my life had I seen anything so charming, and the very sight and thought of that sweet face sent new life spinning through my veins and altered the look of the world for me.

I went to the Comédie Française that night to see Bernhardt, but the face of Mdlle. X. danced between me and the divine Sara and diverted my thoughts from even her finest agonies.

In the nature of things the following afternoon found me once more at the Salon renewing my tête-à-tête with the beautiful unknown. I noticed that Mdlle. X. attracted very general attention, and scarcely a passer-by but stopped and lingered to admire. It struck me as very ludicrous to find myself actually beginning to feel jealous of these attentions.

'Fair—one!' I heard the same voice behind me.

And again that other voice: 'No—dark!' and again a wrangle, and when I turned I saw two young men assiduously taking note of the crowd, though why and wherefore I could not make out.

The desire suddenly possessed me to become the owner of that picture, and I made my way to the secretary's desk to inquire if it was for sale.

'No, monsieur,' the secretary was explaining with smiling courtesy to a man who had arrived just in front of me, 'that portrait would have been sold fifty—a hundred times, had it been for sale, but it is not offered.'

The other man turned away, and in my not over fluent French I asked the secretary if his remark applied to No. 1001, feeling fully assured in my own mind that it did so.

He smilingly confirmed my fears, and I too passed on. I had already looked for the address of M. Louis Bidard in the catalogue, but it was not there. I turned back to the desk and asked the secretary, who was just dismissing another applicant, if he could give it to me.

'I would, monsieur, with pleasure, but'—and he shook his head knowingly—'there is none.'

'But how—?' I began.

'There is no M. Louis Bidard. It is a *nom de*

crayon, and I am instructed not to divulge the artist's name.'

There was nothing more to be done, and I went back to take another look at Mdlle. X.

'Fair—one!' said the voice behind me.

'Dark—if you please!' said the other voice. *Tiens!* it is the same gentleman again. That does not count.'

'Oh, yes, it does, *mon ami!*'

'Very well, then he is mine.'

'Not a bit of it! Not a very little bit of it, my child! He is distinctly and emphatically blonde.'

'*Phistre!*' Your eye is losing its cunning, *mon gars*. Monsieur's complexion is brown—distinctly brown, with a tendency towards black. So that counts to me.'

I could not make out what they were quarrelling about, and I strolled away and left the building.

It became a regular part of my day's programme to pay my respects to Mdlle. X., and the calm gaze of the great violet eyes, with just a hint of shy wistfulness in them, remained with me all the day and brightened everything else I saw.

Several times I imagined myself the object of remark from the same half-dozen young fellows who seemed to have constituted themselves a guard of honour to Mdlle. X., and to take note of the many who stopped to admire her. I had by this time learned to distinguish them as art students, but what might be the meaning of their curious carry-on I could not at all make out.

One afternoon, however, as I strolled up to the portrait, one of these young gentlemen gave a cry of triumph, darted forward and, to my great astonishment, shook me heartily by the hand, gabbling as he did so at the rate of two hundred words a minute.

I was not quite sure if he was making fun of me or not, for he certainly was not of my acquaintance.

But it is my custom to grasp little nettles of this kind firmly and so destroy their sting. Accordingly I gripped his hand and smiled pleasantly on him and murmured, 'So very pleased to make monsieur's acquaintance!' till he howled, and clasping his right arm with his left hand, as though he feared it would come off, he finally sank on to his knees, and his three friends danced round us in paroxysms of laughter, while I continued shaking him heartily by the hand.

'Ah, the poor Philippe! he is broken, he is mangled,' cried one, between his spasms of laughter. 'Have pity on him, monsieur! He is *bon garçon* and meant no harm.'

'Nor I, monsieur,' I said; 'I simply accepted the greeting of monsieur, whose acquaintance I am delighted to make,' and as I wrung his hand once more Master Philippe howled again.

However, I released him at last, and he got up and carefully pulled each separate finger into shape and smoothed it out and then impressively bandaged his hand in his handkerchief. He was a merry youth, however, and bore no ill-will.

'Allow me to introduce my friends, monsieur,' he said, waving the bandaged hand towards each one in turn. 'Monsieur Louis Duval, Monsieur Jean Lépine Monsieur Raoul Delavoye. Pray proffer them the hand of friendship also.'

But they one and all declined and contented themselves with bows.

'And now, messieurs, perhaps you will have the extreme kindness to explain why we are on such friendly terms.'

'Assuredly,' said Philippe of the bandaged hand, 'it is due to monsieur. It is thus, monsieur. Monsieur has unwittingly rendered me a service, and I desired to thank him for it.'

'I am very happy to have been of service to you. How did I manage it? What is it I have done?'

'You see that portrait, monsieur?'—pointing to Mdle. X.

I nodded.

'Yes,' laughed Philippe, 'monsieur has seen it several times, and in that lies the service he has rendered me. You see, monsieur, we are divided. Louis and Jean there hold that like tends to like. Raoul and myself hold that the strongest affinity lies between opposites. That a fair man prefers a dark woman, and a dark man a fair woman. And you, monsieur—?'

'Opposites, I think, as a rule. But that portrait is so very beautiful that anyone would be attracted by it. Can you tell me who Mdle. X. is, Monsieur Philippe?'

He shook his head.

'Perhaps you can tell me where to find M. Louis Bidard?'

A glance flashed between them, and I got an impression of something like a wink.

'But, yes, monsieur, that is easy. We can take monsieur there in the twinkling of an eye.'

'I shall be infinitely obliged to you.'

'*Allons!*' said Philippe promptly. 'We will go at once,' and he led the way. The others linked arms and followed, with scarce concealed expectation and enjoyment.

Master Philippe's merry eyes twinkled many times before we reached our destination, and I had begun to wonder where we were getting to when he halted suddenly and pointed across the street to a gaily-decorated restaurant, along the front of which ran a large gilt-lettered sign—'A la Palette d'Or, par Louis Bidard.'

I stared at it in surprise. It was an artist's studio I was expecting, not a restaurant.

'But—' I began.

'Stay, we will introduce you to him,' said Philippe, and led the way inside.

A stout, high-coloured, Napoleon-Third-faced man in his shirt sleeves stood behind the counter. Flitting to and fro among the marble-topped tables was an exceedingly pretty girl. Both the girl and the man greeted us with friendly nods.

‘Monsieur Bidard,’ said my keeper, ‘here is an English gentleman who has come all the way from the Salon to shake hands with you.’

‘Enchanted!’ beamed M. Bidard, extending a hand like a big beefsteak. ‘What can I do for monsieur?’

Our handshake passed off without any undue display of strength on either side, to the great disappointment of my new friends.

‘I fear, Monsieur Bidard, I am here under a misapprehension,’ I managed to piece out. ‘I came to see M. Louis Bidard, the painter of a portrait in the Salon.’

‘Ah, these young men!’ said Bidard with a twinkle. ‘Monsieur is not the first, but I have not the honour. However, being here, can I be of any other service to monsieur?’

‘Certainly,’ said I, taking a sudden resolution. ‘We want dinner and a private room. That is if my friends will join me?’

‘Will we?’ said Philippe. ‘Will we not? Monsieur is—what is this that the little Peetairs calls it?’

‘*Tromp-brique!*’ said Raoul.

‘That’s it. Monsieur is *tromp-brique* and *bon garçon* altogether. We accept his hospitality. Is it not so, my children?’

The children replied in chorus that it was very much so.

‘*Allons, then!*’ said I, and followed Monsieur Bidard, who was inviting us to upper regions.

‘Ninette will wait upon us, Monsieur Bidard,’ cried Philippe.

‘Assuredly, Monsieur Philippe, Ninette will be enchanted.’

Dinner was served almost immediately, but Ninette had managed to find time to decorate herself specially for the occasion, and proved a decided addition to the festivities. She was as lively in her talk as she was deft in her service, and flashed back a dozen smart clipped words for every one the young artists addressed to her. From what I could catch of the talk, which was mostly too rapid and too idiomatic for my understanding, the young lady was in the habit of occasionally acting as model in one of the schools close at hand, and so was exceedingly well known to my friends. They were all on the merriest of terms, and we all enjoyed ourselves exceedingly.

It was only when Ninette had brought us gallantly through a very excellent dinner, and provided us with coffee and liqueurs and American cigarettes, and had then wafted herself out of the room amid a chorus of compliments on herself and the dinner and everything else, that I turned to Philippe—who had been rendered perfectly happy by my begging him to chose the wines for the feast, and had done it to our great satisfaction and his own—and said,—

‘And now, Monsieur Philippe, if you bear no ill-will for my unjustifiable assault upon you at our first meeting, will you do me a favour?’

‘Monsieur Lamont, I am yours to command. Oh, that all Englishmen were like you! We would love them as it is not always possible to do. Ask, monsieur! *Tiens*, I know. You wish to know who painted Mdlle. X.?’

‘Exactly!’

‘I will tell you. It is Charles Roussel. He lives in the Rue Catharine, No. 13.’

‘And do you know who Mdlle. X. is?’

He shook his head. ‘No. We none of us know that. In fact, there may be no such person.’

‘But, no, Philippe, *mon ami*,’ said one of the others. ‘Can you now, I put it to you, can you

imagine Roussel evolving that beauty from his own head?'

'It is difficult,' acknowledged Philippe, 'but then, you see, I do not like Roussel myself.'

'He is a clever painter, anyhow,' I said.

'Oh, he is clever, that is without doubt, but—' and he shrugged his shoulders and shook his head.

'Do you suppose he would sell the picture?' I asked.

'He might,' he said doubtfully; 'there could be no harm in asking. He might sell or he might throw a bottle at your head. He is a trifle cracked at times, monsieur, and he is a sulky devil, though he can be charming enough when he chooses, only he doesn't often choose. That is the reason why I, though I am accustomed to mixing with mild lunatics—and he looked solemnly round at the rest, who however only winked lazily back at him through the smoke—that is why I do not get on with Roussel.'

'He is making fifty thousand francs a year,' said Raoul.

'And mostly portraits,' said Jean.

'No imagination,' said Louis.

'Not a scrap,' said Philippe. 'He might as well be a photographer.'

'In which case, with his connections, he would probably make twice as much,' said Raoul.

'All the same,' said Jean, 'he may be a good painter, but he is not an artist.'

'Isn't that rather a nice distinction?' I said. 'After all, do you not all of you paint portraits? If it is a landscape nature is your model, if it is a historical scene you still work from models, I suppose—'

'Still there the artistic faculty comes in,' said Philippe, 'and this pig Roussel has it not.'

'Then we may conclude there is an original,' said I.

'Must be,' said Philippe.

‘I will call on Monsieur Roussel.’

‘And if he’s in a bad mood and throws a bottle at your head shake him by the hand, Monsieur Lamont.’

They wanted to show me something of life in the Quartier, but I was in no humour for racketing, and we parted the best of friends.

CHAPTER III

MDLLE. X.—HER PAINTER

WHEN I strolled into the Salon next day, it seemed to me that even before I reached that part which I had come to know so well I became aware of something unusual in it. As a rule I could distinguish the glimmer of the sweet bright face through the crowd while yet I was far away. It always seemed to be waiting for me. But my very first glance ahead this day showed me that something was wrong.

I walked quickly to the place. Mdlle. X. was gone. Instead of the straight, calm gaze of the eloquent eyes a patch of bare wall loomed up among the surrounding pictures with all the dull effrontery of a boarded-up window.

I strode away to the secretary and inquired of him what had become of the picture.

‘I can tell you nothing, monsieur, except that monsieur—er—Bidard came in this morning and removed it—against our rules.’

‘M. Roussel?’ I said.

He showed no surprise at my knowledge of the artist’s name, but said curtly with a depreciatory twist of the mouth,—

‘Yes, M. Roussel.’

'Thanks,' I said; 'I will see him.'

I judged from his manner that he had had quite enough of M. Roussel for that day.

I had no difficulty in finding the Rue Catharine, having made successful search for it on the map before starting out that morning. No. 13 was an old-fashioned, faded and rather dirty-looking mansion. The *concierge* bade me ascend to the third floor, and there I found M. Roussel's name on a card fastened to the door by drawing-pins. I rapped, and immediately on the sharp '*Entrez!*' turned the handle and entered.

It was a good-sized room and lighter than one would have expected from the outside look of the house. An archway with curtains led into another room at the back. Canvasses of all sizes hung from the walls or leaned up against them. They were mostly portraits. Such as were not struck me as wild fantasies verging on the horrible. A wood fire smouldered in a great heap of white ashes on the hearth, and my eye fell instantly on a picture standing against the skirting board with its face to the wall. Some instinct told me at once that it was the portrait of Mdlle. X.

A tall man in a loose jacket, with his legs defiantly apart stood with his back to the fire, smoking a cigarette.

He looked up as I entered, and I was evidently not the person he expected.

He was a good-looking fellow, with black moustach and pointed beard, but there was a quick, suspicious white gleam about his black eyes which did not commend itself to me.

'M. Roussel?' I asked.

'*Oui, monsieur?*' he replied in a sharp, questioning tone, which said, as plainly as if he had voiced it, 'Who the devil are you, and what the devil do you want?'

'I have come to ask if you are disposed to sell the

portrait of Mdlle. X. which you were showing in the Salon?'

'No, sir!' and the black eyes stared at me hypnotically.

'I would be prepared to pay a good price for it.'

'It is not for sale, monsieur.'

'Not at any price?'

'Not at any price.'

'I am sorry for that. I was much struck with it as a most excellent piece of work.'

He bowed and puffed at his cigarette and showed me plainly that he wanted me to be gone. But I was not to be put off so easily as all that.

'Can I not induce you to reconsider the matter, monsieur?'

He glowered at me for a moment through his smoke, then snatched up a knife from the table, turned to the portrait, whose face was towards the wall, and dug the knife through one corner of the canvas. With a quick, nervous motion he sawed the blade round inside the frame, making a horrible, ragged, rending noise. Then as the picture came loose he rolled it up face inwards as though he hated to look at it, and flung it on the smouldering fire.

I made a dash at it, upsetting several chairs and an easel in my course, and before he could stop me I had it safely in my hands.

'Now it is mine by right of salvage,' I cried.

The black eyes snapped viciously as he snarled, 'If you take it you steal it.'

'Not at all,' I said. 'I shall pay for it,' and I drew out a thousand-franc note and threw it on the table. *Voilà, monsieur!*

For answer he picked up the note, twisted it into a spill and lighted a fresh cigarette with it.

'Thanks,' I said. 'Now we are quits. You threw away the picture, I recovered it. I threw away the note, you have put it to a very good use.'

The black eyes blazed with anger, and I half expected he would come at me or send something expressive of his feelings. Instead, he ran his fingers through his hair, and with a change of front which almost took away my breath, and which I could not have imitated to save my life, he said quietly,—

‘Permit me to offer you a cigarette, monsieur. Keep the picture by all means. It is worthless—like the original.’

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘If one might inquire as to the original—’

‘No,’ he said. ‘It is better for you that you should not know her. She is disgraced.’

‘It is almost inconceivable,’ I said.

He shrugged his shoulders with a slight wave of the hand which held the cigarette, as much as to say, ‘Believe it or not as you choose. It is quite the same to me.’

‘I find it difficult to connect disgrace with so sweet a face,’ I said again, hoping to draw him out.

‘Monsieur is not long in Paris, perhaps?’ He smiled, with a gleam of white teeth, which aroused in me an unnatural wish to drive my fist at them.

‘Not very long. I have been here about a fortnight.’

‘Ah! there is much to learn,’ he said with a touch of insolence.

‘But I have had the pleasure of seeing women in almost every country in the world,’ I said, ‘and I cannot associate anything disgraceful with a face like that.’

But he was not to be drawn. He only grinned meaningly and repeated his shrug.

‘Monsieur is from England, I judge, by his accent. Is it not so?’

‘From Scotland,’ I said.

‘That is not quite so bad. We do not hate Scotland quite so much as England. In the past we were

friends at times. *Tenez!* I have painted the beautiful Marie of Scotland. See you!' and he strode to the front windows, where a large painting stood on an easel.

It was a surprising piece of work and confirmed the views of my friends of the previous night as to M. Roussel's touch of craziness.

Lying on the floor of a room, amid a huge pile of many-coloured silken cushions, was a wizened, red-haired woman, with deathly white face and eyes starting out of her head, while all around her Mary Queen of Scots danced a horrible dance of death. There were at least a dozen Queen Maries—all the same figure, in a dozen different attitudes of wild *diablerie*—all dressed alike in a single long white sleeveless garment cut low in the neck, which whirled and flew and showed lovely white legs, but in every figure the soft white neck was cut short, and the head which should have been there hung from the dancer's hand by its long bright hair, and all the eyes of all the heads were fixed, you knew, on the horror-starting eyes of the dying Elizabeth.

It was ludicrously ghastly, and how any man could have squandered his genius on producing it passed my conception.

'Strong, is it not?' he said. 'It is for the Salon next year.'

'Very strong,' said I, with a great inclination to vent my feelings in a yell of laughter, and then I felt once more a still stronger inclination to put my fist into his face, for the wretch had used my beautiful Mdlle. X. as his model for the faces of his royal Bacchantes.

'You will have to alter those faces, monsieur,' I said.

'And why?'

'For the same reason that you flung away the original portrait,' I said, 'and also because if those faces appeared, supposing they will take it at the

Salon, which I should think unlikely, I would be there the first day to put my stick through every face.'

'Ta, ta!' he laughed. 'Monsieur is wonderfully interested in Mdlle. X.'

'Shall I tell you just exactly what I think, M. Roussel?' I said.

'By all means, if you very much wish to,' he grinned.

'Then,' said I, staring straight into his black eyes, 'I think you're going crazy,' and I tapped my forehead to emphasise my meaning.

It was abominably rude, of course, but he was perpetrating an outrage on Mdlle. X., whoever she was, and I wanted him to know what one man, at all events, thought about it. He said nothing. I waited for an explosion, but it did not come. He stood leaning against the window frame, looking at the picture. I walked towards the door and looked back at him. He had not moved. I went out and closed the door.

CHAPTER IV

MDLLE. X.—HERSELF

I WAS delighted to find the picture practically uninjured. The back was merely smoked, the face was not even blistered. I gloried in my treasure, and would not have parted with it for fifty times the trifle it had cost me.

I decided not to have it framed till I could give it the place of honour over the fireplace in my own special sanctum in my home in England, when I had found it and had got settled in it. For now, after ten years of the sea, and two of unfettered roving over the

face of the earth, my thoughts were beginning to dwell longingly on the delights of a home of my own.

It must be a cosy house, not too large, covered with ivy and sheltered by trees. It must face the sea, and have a trim lawn running down towards it if possible. I would buy a two-hundred-ton steam yacht, and it seemed to me that amid such surroundings there were the elements at all events of peace and happiness.

I must, of course, keep my promise and visit old Mrs Sandbacker out in Los Angeles, but I had no slightest desire to settle there, not even though she should try to tempt me to it with the whole or a portion of her remaining millions. And so, after another week of Paris, I packed my boxes with great content, sent the bulkier ones direct to London, and started for a final leisurely jaunt towards home through Normandy and Brittany, with my beautiful Mdlle. X. carefully packed in my portmanteau inside a stout roll of cardboard to prevent her crushing.

She was my chiefest possession, and the sight of her lovely face thrilled me every time I looked at it, and set a glow in my heart whenever I thought of it, which was pretty well all the time. To say that I would have given much and gone far to meet Mdlle. X. in person is quite unnecessary.

'And yet,' I said to myself at times, 'perhaps it is as well as it is. Mademoiselle in the flesh might turn out very different from Mademoiselle on canvas. Better the charm of illusionment than a possibly ghastly disillusionment.'

I found the remote, slow life of Brittany very soothing after Vienna and St Petersburg and Paris, and I lingered there longer than I had intended—first for my own enjoyment, and then for reasons of much greater moment.

Sombre, time-worn old Rennes delighted me. I made it my headquarters for a time, and thence rode and rambled all over the countryside, and thus it was

that, for the second time in my life, fate or luck or Providence threw me a wonderful chance, and to my lasting benefit and happiness it did not escape me.

I had been spending a day in Vitré, and came so near to losing the train back to Rennes that it was actually on the move when I leaped through the doors of the waiting-room, almost upsetting the blue-bloused attendant who stood with his back towards me watching the train start.

He gave a great bellow of astonishment at my temerity, and so drew upon me the attention of all the other officials on the platform. A gorgeous scowling *gendarme* made as though to stop me. I dodged him easily, and encountered three or four more blue blouses, sauntering along with their hands in their pockets. They made surprised and ineffectual grabs at me, but I got past them, sprang on to the rapidly-running step of the train, and throwing back the catch of the carriage door nearest to me, turned the handle and drew myself in.

It was a first-class, and had two other occupants, a priest and a lady. I leaned out of the window to fasten the lower catch, waved an ironical farewell to my friends on the platform, and then sank down into the seat, panting with my run, and in high good humour at having won through.

Before I had recovered my wind I glanced round to see who my fellow travellers might be, and then—I remember still the catch in my breath and the feeling of intense repression that took hold of me, as though I were gazing on a beautiful bubble which an undue breath might dissipate.

In the further corner of the carriage sat—Mdlle. X. It was impossible for me to be mistaken. Did I not know every curve of the beautiful face, every hair almost of the shapely, well-poised head? That picture had not been in my possession all these days for nothing.

I gazed at her—open-mouthed, I doubt not—with wonder which was not far from awe and was certainly very near to reverence. It was truly wonderful and beyond words that, of all the carriages in that train, I should have tumbled into the one that contained the sweet living original of the pictured face that was never out of my thoughts.

It was Mdlle. X. without a doubt, and yet not just the Mdlle. X. of the portrait. The lovely face was shadowed, the straight calm eyes gazed out over the passing country with a saddened look in them. There was a pathetic little droop at that corner of the mouth which was nearest me. She was in trouble. I wondered what it was and ached to help her. But in its essentials the face was the one I knew so well and had come to love so much.

I wondered whether the thin-lipped, ascetic-faced old man in the broad-brimmed beaver and long black soutane who sat opposite to her had anything to do with it, and the possibility of it made me dislike him.

How could he sit there so cold and stern, with never a comforting word or look for the sorrowful girl in front of him? Later on it occurred to me, in justice to him, that if they had come all the way from Paris, as was probable, he had had ample opportunity of offering such comfort and consolation as might be in him—though, indeed, the grim face of him did not suggest any deep fount of either—and had probably availed himself of it. Once, as I sat gazing at her with this rude stare of utter wonder and surprise, the girl turned her head slowly towards me, impelled thereto, no doubt, by the unconscious impression of my look. But the great sad eyes rested on me for a brief moment as unconcernedly as if I had been a stone, and with as little recognition of my being, and when I dared to glance at her again she was looking sadly at the passing landscape once more.

While my mind was still in a whirl at my wonderful and unexpected discovery, the head of the conductor in charge of the train came suddenly through the window alongside me and recalled me to a due sense of my misconduct.

'I'm awfully sorry to have broken rules,' I began in English, and, though I was looking at him, I got an impression of a sudden start on the part of Mdlle. X., and it seemed to me that she turned towards us. 'Pardon! I regret, *M. le Conducteur*, the unusual manner in which I got on to the train, but, you see, I was very anxious not to miss it, and there is, I think, no harm done.' I slipped a five-franc piece into his hand, and with a short homily on the enormity of my offence and the risk I had run, he grimped his way along the footboard and left me absolved.

When I glanced at Mademoiselle she was looking out of the window again, but it seemed to me there was a tinge of colour in the white cheek which had not been there before.

Before we reached Rennes I had made up my mind what to do, and that was simply not to lose sight of Mdlle. X., come of it what might. They might be going straight on to Brest, or to St Malo, or to Vannes, or to any place on any of the lines leading to those places. But wherever they went I was going too, and, if possible, without their perceiving it.

They descended at the station at Rennes, and the old priest led the way to the buffet with the alacrity of a keen appetite. I was sharp set too, and having ascertained that no train left the station on any of the westward lines for over an hour, I made my way outside, drove rapidly to my hotel, cajoled black-browed Marie, who happened to be on duty in the office, into preparing a dinner basket for me, packed a few necessaries into a small bag, and within the

hour was sitting contentedly in the waiting-room at the station, muffled in a big travelling cloak, and with a ticket for St Malo in my pocket, since that happened to be the first train to start.

As soon as the doors were opened I strolled straight to the buffet, and glancing in, as I walked past, saw that my two friends were still there, she sitting listlessly at the table with downcast eyes, the old priest leaning back in his chair, looking much more cheerful than he had done in the train.

I passed on to the *buvette* and ordered a glass of vermouth in anticipation of my dinner which I would eat *en route*. The St Malo train snorted itself away, the Brest train followed, and a careful outlook assured me that my two were still where I had last seen them. It was along the Vannes line then that they were travelling, and sure enough, as soon as it was ready, and before the waiting-room doors were opened, the old priest led his charge along to a first-class carriage, and the conductor of the train himself shut them in, and slipped the catch of the door on them. I watched them closely from the door of the *buvette* and noted the carriage they occupied, and as soon as the outer crowd was loosed from confinement and came streaming along the platform, I joined it and climbed into the carriage next to them, wondering much where I was going, but well satisfied to go the full journey wherever it might be.

I fell to on my belated dinner, and blessed black-browed Marie for her ample provision. At every station I kept an anxious lookout, and at the fourth they got down, and, allowing them so much time to get off the platform that I was almost carried off by the train, I followed them.

It was a tiny place—Cour-des-Comptes—and the stationmaster was in a state of extreme agitation—I supposed at the sudden rush of business, but later I came to know that he had other reasons.

The village was some distance away, my fellow travellers had disappeared, and the grinding of rapid wheels in the distance told me that they had been expected.

I set off on foot along the rough country road. It was dark as pitch by this time, and I was stumbling along as philosophically as might be, stubbing my toes on the stones, and at times almost coming to my knees in the ruts—it was just like walking in a watercourse—when I heard a man's rough voice in the darkness behind merrily chanting, 'Ma clef, ma clef, qui a chipé ma clef?' and as the singer came up with me he stopped with a cheerful, 'Holà, monsieur, you get forward slowly!'

'Yes, it's pretty rough walking.'

'Come up here on to the bank, monsieur, that is where the cattle go. There, now we shall get on quicker.'

'Ah, thanks, that is better. You see I'm a stranger here.'

'Monsieur arrived by the train?'

'Yes.'

'From Paris?'

'I was in Paris about ten days ago.'

'Ah, a grand place Paris.'

'Yes, a wonderful place. I have been travelling all over the world, but Paris pleased me more than any other city.'

'It is the finest city in the world,' he said enthusiastically, gratified evidently by my admiration, 'but I have never seen it yet. Sometime—'

'It is a treat in store for you.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Sometime—'

We were on a smoother road by this time, and presently passed over a bridge with the rush of water down below and here and there a bead of light gleaming out of the darkness of the banks.

'You are employed at the station?' I asked.

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‘Yes, monsieur, I am *sous-chef de gare*, but I live in the village.’

‘Is there an inn there?’

‘Ye-es,’ he said, with a doubtful intonation. ‘Mother Thibaud can give you a bed—if she will. She’s a bit queer-tempered at times. Perhaps I can assist, monsieur. I am on good terms with the daughter, you see.’

‘I shall be greatly obliged to you.’ This was just the ally I wanted.

‘Then, if monsieur will take my advice, he will order something to drink as soon as we enter, and show the old one the colour of his money. She can’t withstand that. She’s an old close-fist is Madame Thibaud, but she loves the pieces, you understand, and she must have a good many by this time, and sometime—’

‘By the way,’ I said, ‘I thought I noticed an old gentleman and a lady get out here also. Where have they got to?’

It was curious, but I certainly got the impression of a slight touch of restraint in his voice as he replied,—

‘Yes, that was the lady of the château, Mademoiselle des Comptes and M. l’Abbé Dieufoy.’

‘Do they live here?’

‘Occasionally, monsieur. Not often.’

It seemed to me policy not to pursue the subject lest he should arrive at the idea that that was the sole reason for my being there. Evidently he was already on that track, for after a pause he asked,—

‘Does monsieur make a long stay in Cour-des-Comptes?’

‘I am not sure yet. The country is rather pretty round here is it not?’—the depth at which the river ran gave me the idea that it might be so.

‘Not bad,’ he said, ‘but the life is dull.’

‘Not so lively, you think, as Paris?’

‘Name of a dog! no. If I could live in Paris I

would never visit Cour-des-Comptes,' and it evidently puzzled him mightily why three people in one evening, who could live in Paris if they chose, should wish to come to Cour-des-Comptes.

We arrived at the village and at the inn, which seemed a mere drinking shop. I begged him to order whatever he thought fit for the propitiation of the old lady, to the end that I might get a bed, and we entered.

A number of other blue blouses were sitting stolidly at the dark wooden tables, automatically lifting and setting down their thick pot *chopines* of cider. There was a murmured 'Good evening' as we entered, and at sight of a stranger whatever talk had been going on died away into a heavy silence.

My conductor bowed deferentially to the sour-faced old dame, in a very white cap and much blue petticoat, who sat knitting at the far end of the room, and when a pretty, dark-eyed girl came forward to the small table where we had placed ourselves, to request our order, he put his hand over hers as it rested on the table and smiled at her, and she showed no annoyance, but on the contrary seemed rather to like it.

'Jeanne, monsieur wants a bed. Can you work it?'

Jeanne's pretty lips pursed up as though to say it might be difficult, and her shapely shoulders gave a tiny shrug as though to say, 'You know why.'

'Meanwhile,' said she, with a family eye to business, 'what can I get for messieurs?'

'I would like some very good coffee, Jeanne, and some fine cognac,' I said. 'I dined *en route*. And you, *mon ami*? ' I said to my friend from the station.

'Nothing beats Jeanne's coffee,' he said, 'and cognac makes it heavenly. *Tenez*, Jeanne! Monsieur will pay for it, and then the mother will be happy.'

I handed Jeanne a twenty-franc piece, and asked her to keep it against my board and lodging for a day or two. Then I offered my own blue blouse a

cigar from my case, and he was absolutely happy. He kept glancing out of the corner of his eye at the progress of matters at the other end of the room, and reporting in a low murmur,—

‘The old curmudgeon! she’s biting your gold to see if it’s good. It’s all right. Jeanne’s making the coffee and telling the old one she’ll see to getting a room ready. If Jeanne sees to it you’ll be all right, monsieur. Heavens, what a cigar this is! *Tenez, Vaurel, mon beau*, just smell this’—and he got up and held it under the nose of another blue blouse at the big table, a burly fellow with only one arm and a straw-coloured beard and moustache—‘ever smelt anything like that?’

‘Havannah,’ growled Vaurel. ‘Monsieur did not buy that in Rennes?’

‘No, I bought a couple of thousand of those in New York, and I’ve just about got through them. Permit me to offer you one, M. Vaurel.’

‘*Mon Dieu!* Two thousand! Why, it is a fortune! Monsieur must have a gold mine if he does everything else on the same scale.’

I laughed and said, ‘I like a good cigar.’

‘Who doesn’t?’ growled Vaurel, ‘but we others can’t all get them.’

The others along the table looked on with a glimmer of interest in their weather-seamed old faces. They were all old men, and their dripping mugs of cider struck me as very cold and uninviting. I could not offer them all cigars, but I asked my friend if he thought they would be willing to join us in coffee and cognac. He put it to them in a patois I did not understand and with a grin all over his merry face. Would they? Wouldn’t they?

Only one questioning voice was raised. It came from a shrivelled, little old fellow at the far end of the table. His face was thin and pinched, his eyes watery, and his whole aspect very forlorn and broken.

'Monsieur is not a Prussian, is he?' he asked in French.

'Don't be a fool, Père Goliot,' growled Vaurel. 'Don't you think I know a Prussian when I see one?'

'When one has suffered it makes one suspicious,' said the old man in a shaky voice.

'And have I not suffered at their hands?' asked Vaurel.

'No doubt, Monsieur Vaurel; but not as I. My three brave boys—' then he put down his old withered head on the table and fairly sobbed.

'Cheer up, Père Goliot,' cried Vaurel; 'times are going to be better, and here comes the coffee and the cognac. Be assured monsieur is no Prussian. If he had been I would have known it by this arm of mine, which is not here, as soon as his foot came inside the door. I can smell a Prussian a hundred yards away.'

'I'm a Scotchman,' I said.

'There you are, Père Goliot. Monseieur is a Scotchman, do you see. Now try that coffee, and there are two extra lumps of sugar for you. I shall bring you some fish to-morrow,' and the burly Vaurel got up and patted the old man on the back and made him sip his coffee till a show of colour came into his face and he no longer marred the subdued hilarity of the occasion. They all looked as if a little warming up inside would be beneficial to their bodily comfort, and I asked Jeanne to leave the bottle of cognac, and their contentment was complete. Even Madame Thibaud grew almost cheerful. As for Jeanne, she hovered around us beaming like a sunset.

CHAPTER V

MDLLE. X.—HER HOME

A BETTER introduction to the village of Cour-des-Comptes no man could have had, and I had a good reason to congratulate myself on the moment when Louis Vard came upon me in the dark road leading from the station.

‘Is monsieur fond of fishing?’ asked Vaurel in his big bass voice.

‘I am a fisherman when I get the chance, M. Vaurel. Do you get good sport here?’

‘You come down to me, anybody’ll show you where I live, and I’ll show you what we can do, monsieur. If anyone knows how to fish the Vilaine, it is I, Prudent Vaurel.’

‘That’s a bargain, then,’ I said; ‘I shall come to-morrow.’

‘Good,’ said he; ‘we shall have rare times, you and I.’

Nothing could possibly have suited my plans better. Vaurel’s question and offer had put into my hand the key of the countryside. Henceforth I was free to wander whithersoever I would without question, for the rod in my hand would frank me in advance to any would-be questioner.

My guests were to depart in a body, all except Vaurel and Louis Vard. Madame had already retired, and Jeanne’s bright eyes were like sleepy stars. Then, with renewed injunctions to me to come down to his house in the morning, Vaurel went singing down the road, and I became aware of the fact that I was the no-company third to Louis and Jeanne, and so, with hearty thanks to Louis for his kind offices during the

evening, I begged Jeanne to show me to my room and left Louis awaiting her return.

From certain indications I judged it was Jeanne's own room and bed in which I slept, but it was none the less comfortable on that account. It was a square, heavy-looking little room, by dim candle-light at all events, panelled to the ceiling in dark oak, and behind the heavy panels, richly carved in rough arabesques, were the beds, identical with the box-beds of my native land. The only furniture consisted of two great carved black oak chests, and a small square looking-glass hanging on the wall.

Well satisfied with the day's work I slept splendidly. I washed next morning in the back garden in a bucket of water drawn by Jeanne from the well, enjoyed a big bowl of excellent milk coffee she had prepared for me, with the freshest of butter and the brownest of bread, and then asked her how I should find Vaurel's house by the river.

I would have liked to ask her many more questions concerning Mdlle. X., but deemed it best to go slowly in the matter and not give any indications of the real reason for my being there.

Jeanne herself, however, incidentally introduced the subject.

'Shall I put you to any inconvenience, Mademoiselle Jeanne, if I stay here a day or two?' I asked.

'But no, monsieur, we shall be delighted, and there is no inconvenience whatever. You did the old ones good last night. It was a pleasure to see them so cheerful.'

'They are not generally cheerful, then?'

'*Mon Dieu*, no!' She shook her head. 'Not of late. You see, monsieur, the season has been a bad one, the crops were bad, and the cider was not good, and altogether things have not been bright in the country here. It may be better now that Mademoiselle has come—'

She broke off short, but this was a subject I had no objection to her pursuing.

‘Mademoiselle? Who is she?’

‘Mademoiselle at the château,’ and then the pretty lips closed tight.

‘Ah! and she may make things better? How is that?’

‘She is very charitable. She won’t let the people go short if she knows it.’

‘And she will be sure to hear of it?’

‘Oh, she must hear of it. It is my aunt who is housekeeper at the château, and my cousin Hortense who acts as Ma’m’selle’s maid when she is here. She is a very pretty girl.’

‘Who? Hortense or Ma’m’selle?’

‘Oh, monsieur! I meant Hortense. Mademoiselle is altogether lovely, but different, of course, from us others.’

‘This seems a country of pretty girls, Jeanne,’ at which Jeanne’s eyes laughed and her lips showed a gleam of white teeth.

‘Well, I will go and find M. Vaurel and see what sport he can offer me. I shall ask him to join me at dinner, shall we say at six o’clock? And if you see M. Louis, Jeanne’—and Jeanne’s eyes twinkled as though she thought it by no means improbable—‘you might beg him with my compliments to join us. I feel greatly indebted to him.’

‘*Merci, monsieur,*’ said Jeanne, and I went off down the road.

Through the village square, where I was an object of curiosity to the white-capped women—a packet of the best tobacco she had at the tobacconist’s, and it was not very good—then along a rough, high-banked road which crept through the woods along the side of the hill—then a sudden turn and a rapid descent among the trees towards the noise of running waters and the monotonous thud, thud, thud, thud of a water

wheel, and at last I was on the river bank and found myself in front of a queer little rough stone house, the door of which stood wide.

I knocked and called 'M. Vaurel!' but got no answer, so I lit a cigar and sat down on the wooden bench to await the owner's return.

The water in front of me flowed deep and smooth, and reflected as in a dark mirror the foliage of the steep wooded banks which were indeed almost hill-sides. About two hundred yards further down the smooth surface fell over a weir and at one side stood the mill, the soft, monotonous thudding and buzzing of whose wheels detracted no more from the peacefulness of things than would the humming of a bee. After serving the mill the broken water swept round in a wide curve, and the high wooded banks stood far back, and there, in the green strath between the hills and the river, stood a great house, undoubtedly the château where Mdlle. X. was living. If the little stone house had been built for the purpose of keeping an eye on the château it could not have been better placed. I decided that M. Vaurel and I would be very good friends.

While I was still enjoying the prospect through the smoke of my cigar, a trumpet-like hail from across the water announced the arrival of friend Vaurel.

'*Holà, monsieur! Bon jour, bon jour! we shall be across in a moment. Allons, Boulot, mon petit!*'

He was in a flat-bottomed punt by this time and came poling across the river, and as the projecting nose of the punt ran up on to the shelving bank, a most formidable-looking bull-dog, with the bandiest of legs, and a massive head, and a repulsively-perfect face, scrambled hurriedly ashore, and came running up to the house, without ever looking back towards his master.

'Come back, Boulot, beast, pig! Have a care, monsieur, he is not good with strangers!' cried Vaurel.

But I was a dog lover and had no fear of him.

'Well, Bully, old man,' I said, 'come along and make friends,' and surely if he was not English-born his ancestors were, for the purposeful eyes blinked at the word and the stout little tail gave a friendly wag. He sniffed twice at me just by way of making a show of doing his duty, then the great front paws came up on my knee and Bully's tremendous face was almost alongside mine, and he seemed to be wanting to say, 'Speak to me again in the tongue of my forebears. Your words stir something inside of me. Surely I too come of the British race,' and Boulot and I were friends.

'*Tiens!*' said Vaurel, as he came up the slope swinging a brace of wood-pigeons in his hand, and dimly perceiving something of all this, 'Boulot's English blood is stirred at sight of you. He frightens most people.'

'We are going to be very good friends,' I said.

Who lives in the big house over there, M. Vaurel?

'That is the family seat of the Des Comptes, monsieur; they own all the country round here.'

'Really. They must be wealthy. I should have thought rich people like that would live in Paris.'

'So they do mostly, but sometimes they come here.'

'Anybody there just now? Can one go over the house?'

I saw by his manner that he wished to avoid the answer I wanted, and this constant evasion of reference to Mdlle. des Comptes puzzled me greatly, and only served to put a keener edge on my desire for information.

'The house is occupied just now,' he said at last; 'perhaps if monsieur stays long enough the opportunity may come.'

'Ah, the family is there perhaps, monsieur and madame?' I queried.

'Monsieur lies at Sedan. We were all through the

war together. But the cursed Prussians killed him there, and did their best for me,' and he nodded at his empty sleeve. 'We were together; that is why I live here and have the freedom of the woods and waters over all the countryside.'

'I see,' I nodded, and again deemed it wise not to push him too hard at the moment. I was learning bit by bit, and it was no good trying to go too fast.'

'It is a charming situation,' I said, 'and you ought to be happy there. How did you get the pigeons?'

'I shoot them,' he said, handing me the birds and producing from his pocket a long-barrelled revolver. 'Because M. des Comptes was shot by those pigs of Prussians at Sedan I shoot his wood-pigeons here, and hook his fish and live in this house of his. Monsieur has not breakfasted yet?'

'No. I'm hoping to have one of those pigeons for breakfast,' I said.

'That's it, that's it, exactly!' he said; 'fresh trout from the river and plump wood-pigeons make a feast for a king.'

'And for dinner I hope you will join me at Madame Thibaud's, M. Vaurel. I have asked Mademoiselle Jeanne to be ready for us at six.'

'Good!' said the burly one. 'Monsieur is a god-send in this quiet place.'

We got on admirably, Vaurel and I. He turned out a capital breakfast, and the brown bread and cider only threw into greater relief the excellent qualities of the trout and the wood-pigeons.

'Did you take Père Goliot the promised fish?' I asked, while we were eating. 'I felt quite sorry for the poor old fellow. He looked as if he had had hard times.'

'Yes,' he said, 'he suffered more than most. His three boys went to the war and none came back, not

one. Yes, I took him his fish. We do what we can for him, but the season has been a bad one. Now however that Mademoiselle—'

I listened with all my ears but with no show of eagerness, but he broke off short and turned the subject.

After breakfast and a smoke we fished below the weir and had a fair afternoon's sport. Boulot accompanied us with extreme reluctance, and sat afar off sniffing and snuffing disdainfully, with quick, apprehensive glances at his master whenever by any chance he came anywhere near him. It was only when at last we returned to the house and laid aside our rods, and with our string of trout turned up the path through the woods towards the village, that he showed any signs of the enjoyment of life and ran on briskly in front.

'Come back, pig, Prussian, old bandy-leg! come back, and take care of the house!' shouted his master, but Master Boulot paddled resolutely forward with determination in his tail, and never even looked round at him.. 'Very well, then, don't if you won't. I shall throw you in the water again some day,' and at that the brindled legs twinkled the faster and Boulot disappeared round a turn of the road.

'He hates the water as the crows say the devil hates holy water. I threw him into the river for a wash one day, and he wouldn't speak to me for a week. He scares the children and the fools up above here, so I generally keep him away from them, but it shows what good friends we are that he consents to live so near the water. He heard you talk of dinner and doesn't want to miss the chance.'

'Has he ever bitten any of them?'

'Not he. He wouldn't bite them to save their lives, but they always think he looks as if he was just going to. He killed the sheep dog at the Abbey Farm not long since, though, a big, fierce brute that was bad

to the sheep, and since then the folks are more frightened of Boulot than ever.'

'Where did you get him?'

'It was at Wörth. He was very young then. He was sitting whimpering by his master's dead body, an Englishman who fought on our side there and at Weissenburg. He was starving and I gave him all I had, and buried his master, and he has never left me since. He was at Sedan too and stood between my legs when the Prussians closed in on us for the last time, on the hill there. Heigh ho! they were hard times those. *Mon Dieu!* the things I saw that day. Now, monsieur, if you will go on to Mère Thibaud's and take her those'—handing me a small string of the trout—'I will leave these at the château for Ma'm'selle. I must pay my respects to her.'

'I'll come with you,' I suggested ingenuously.

'No, pardon me, monsieur, it is necessary that I go alone.'

'All right; I'll go and hurry up Jeanne and the dinner.'

CHAPTER VI

MDLLE. X.—HER TROUBLE

WE had capital times together, Vaurel and I, and I soon fell into the habit of strolling down to the little stone house by the river each morning, with a couple of bottles of red wine in my pockets and a yard-long loaf of bread in my hand, as my contribution towards the commissariat department.

After breakfast and a smoke we punted up the river, or fished down it, or strolled through the woods while

Vaurel potted superfluous wood-pigeons for the provisioning of the great house and the small one.

He was of a jovial and reckless disposition, and bit by bit I learned much of his history, and in still more fragmentary fashion picked up sundry scraps of information concerning Mademoiselle. For many days the château showed no signs of occupancy beyond a curl of blue smoke, against the dark background of trees, from one solitary chimney. The brown wooden Venetian shutters along the river front remained tightly closed, and sharply as I watched the house I never caught sight of a soul, except on two or three occasions when the old priest walked on the terrace on this side of the house, pacing slowly to and fro as if in deep thought, and always alone.

I had to be very wary in my search for information, for any direct question put either to Jeanne, or to Vaurel, or to Louis Vard, concerning, even in the most round-about way, Mademoiselle of the château, simply had the effect of bringing the conversation to a full stop.

Briefly, what I had gathered in four days was this. Mademoiselle Denise des Comptes, who was at the château, was, with her brother Gaston, owner of all the land round about. They were wealthy, and when Ma'm'selle was at the château there was no want in the neighbourhood. The softened inflections which came into their voices whenever they spoke of 'Ma'm'selle' conveyed to my mind a sense of loving reverence which told me more than many words. It was surely a very sweet and sympathetic nature which could evoke so warm a feeling in the hearts of these stolid peasants, whom Nature herself treated somewhat indifferently at times and provided for none too bountifully.

But when Ma'm'selle came to stop at the château hard times fled before her, and the villagers looked forward to her coming as hopefully as ice-bound

voyagers look for the summer. This time, however, since the night of her arrival with the Abbé Dieufoy, she had never stirred out of the house, and none of her old friends up in the village had set eyes on her, no one in fact except Madame Tiraud, the housekeeper, and Hortense, her daughter. Ma'm'selle had shut herself up in her room and refused to see even M. Dieufoy. What the trouble was Hortense could not say, but trouble there was of some kind and that of the gravest.

But I could not help noticing that the others did not debate with Hortense the possible nature of Mademoiselle's trouble. She was a rattlebrain, and while she rattled on they were silent. It seemed to me that they knew what the trouble was, but that they did not care to discuss it with Hortense, as one does not discuss weighty matters with a child.

Roussel's expression, 'she is disgraced,' came once into my mind and was promptly rejected. No personal disgrace could attach to that sweet-faced girl, I was ready to stake my life on that. But what the trouble was I could not get at, and, as I have said, any direct attempt thereat simply resulted in a frosty silence.

Vaurel was, if possible, worse than anyone else. Whenever I craftily worked the conversation round in the direction of Mademoiselle Denise and her trouble, he just shook his head and said, 'Pardon, monsieur, let us talk of something else.'

'Thud—thud—thud—thud!' he would say, looking down at the mill. 'All that and the farm up above ought to have been mine, but I was no man of business and I wanted to the wars, and so I left it to my brother Gautier, and he is getting fat on it, and I shoot wood-pigeons and catch the trout.'

'That was not very prudent.'

'No, *mon Dieu!* Prudent by name but never by nature,' he said, with his big laugh, 'but what's the odds! I live and I'm happy, and I have no cares, while Gautier has a shrew of a wife and six brats

who all take after her. *Nom de Dieu!* I'm not sure but I'm better off than he is after all, and anyhow I did man's work for my country.'

One day, as we sat on the bench smoking, we saw the old priest pacing slowly to and fro on the terrace.

'*Tenez!* see the black crow yonder,' said Vaurel. 'For me, I do not like those gentry. They make much trouble in the family at times. I wonder if my little friend here'—fondling his revolver with the long barrel—'would be as good at crows as at the pigeons. If I just knew what Ma'm—' but he did not finish his thoughts aloud. 'I would like to try Boulot on him,' he said after a while. 'No, I do not like those gentlemen of the long robe.'

'Why, what have they done to you?'

'To me!' he cried, 'nothing. I always snapped my fingers at them, but I have watched them on others, sucking the blood of them like leeches as long as there was anything left to suck. *Pah! le bon Dieu* is served in many queer ways in this country, and has to stand scapegoat for many queer things. It's a queer world, monsieur!'

'That's an original discovery of yours, Vaurel, and does you credit. Why don't you try to improve things?'

'What can one man do?' he would say, shrugging off all responsibility as a duck shakes the water off its back.

When he got on the subject of the war, and the mismanagement at headquarters, and the criminal stupidities of the leadership, he would wax furiously eloquent, as one who had seen with his own eyes and suffered in his own body from these things.

'*Dieu de Dieu!*' he would cry, 'I grind my teeth even now at thought of it all. There we were, ill-clad, ill-shod, ill-found, but with the hearts of men—the hearts of Frenchmen, ready to fight to the last gasp, and the fools at the top, the ten-thousand-times-

accursed fools who ought to have known everything and knew less than nothing, they played with us and mishandled us till our hearts were as thin as our boots and as empty as our stomachs. Ah, if we had had a real Bonaparte, a real chip of the old block, to lead us and none of your painted bastard Dutchmen, why we would have mopped those pigs of Prussians all over their cursed sausage land. My faith, yes! But there were many queer things in those days, monsieur. I was in the front rank at Wörth. We were rushing down the slope at the Prussians. The captain of my regiment was just in front of me, a perfect devil of a man—as brave as men are made, but a martinet, a tartar, an insolent—Lepard his name was. He was just in front of me, and he suddenly flung up his arms and fell on his face, and I saw the bullet go into him and it went in from the back.'

'You mean one of his own men shot him?'

He nodded. 'He was a devil, but he was a brave man. I picked him up afterwards. The bullet had gone through him, but he was not dead. I told the surgeon he was cheering us on with his back to the Prussians when the bullet struck him, and the surgeon looked at me, and said, "Quite so! but you see, my friend, the Prussian bullet does not make the same kind of wound as the French bullet, and I quite understand." I guess he was not the only one. Yes, indeed, there were lots of queer things happened in those days.'

This slow, quiet, woodland life was eminently restful, but I began to ask myself what end I was serving by staying at Cour-des-Comptes. I was no nearer making the acquaintance of Mdlle. X. than on the first day of my arrival, and many a time I said to myself that I was simply wasting my time and doing no good by hanging about in this fashion. But all the time I knew that I could no more pack up my traps and go than I could take out my heart and leave it under the bench for Boulot to play with.

She was there, somewhere in the grim grey château by the river, and she was in trouble, and my heart had gone out to her for the sake of her sweet face and the pure soul that shone out through her eyes, before ever I knew who she was or had ever set eyes upon her.

Who could say but that the time might come when she would want my help? On the bare chance I would wait a lifetime.

Lying on the grass watching my float, sitting on the bench watching the château through the smoke of my pipe, lying awake in the night in Jeanne's box bed, I pieced together again and again the meagre scraps of information I had been able to glean from the short-cut sentences of Vaurel and Jeanne and Louis Vard, and turned them over and over in my mind, and groped for the meaning of things, and so came at last to a resolution which might or might not prove a wise one.

It depended on Jeanne, and for Jeanne I had come to have a very high respect.

I proceeded to put the matter to the test.

The following night I lingered smoking in the room downstairs until the poor old village fathers had stumbled away home, and even Louis Vard had brought his lingering farewells to an end. Mère Thibaud had already retired, leaving Jeanne to close up, as was her custom when her customers stopped later than usual.

Jeanne bolted the door and glanced inquisitively at me. I generally took my departure as soon as the last man went, so as not to interrupt her *tête-à-tête* with Louis.

'Jeanne,' I said, 'get me another candle. I want to show you something. Will you come upstairs for a moment?'

She looked a trifle astonished, but got the candle and lighted it, and followed me up the stairs.

I had fastened the portrait of Mdlle. X. to the dark

wood panel of the room just over one of the big chests. I set the candles on the chests and closed the door behind her.

She stood for a moment looking at the lovely face and then,—

‘*Mon Dieu*, it is Ma’m’selle! Where did you get it, monsieur?’

‘In Paris.’

‘She gave it to you? I did not know you knew her.’

‘No, I have never spoken to her, Jeanne.’

‘*Dame!* that is curious,’ and her brows arched in surprise.

‘I saw that picture in the Salon, and the moment I saw it, there was no other picture there for me. Her face bewitched me, Jeanne, and I felt that I could lay down my life to serve her, though I could not find out who she was, or whether there was any such person.’

Jeanne nodded sagely. ‘You are in love with Ma’m’selle.’

‘With her portrait at all events. I have never spoken to her.’

‘All the same you are in love with her,’ nodded Jeanne, as one who knew.

‘Well, maybe. Now, Jeanne, she is in trouble. How can I help her?’

Jeanne pondered with her eyes on Ma’m’selle’s sweet face, but still hesitated to speak what she knew.

‘See now, Jeanne, let me tell you in two words about myself. I was first officer on board ship. An old gentleman, a passenger, fell overboard. I jumped after him and saved his life. A year later he died and he left me by his will five million francs—’

‘Five—millions—of—francs!’ murmured Jeanne, in an awestruck whisper. ‘*Mon Dieu*, what a fortune!’

‘They are at the disposition of Mademoiselle, Jeanne, together with my head and my heart if that will help her in her trouble.’

Jeanne nodded very knowingly, and said, without

speaking, 'Yes, you are in love with her without doubt.'

'Now I want your assistance, Jeanne, and if you will help me, come of it what may, I will give you on your wedding day a dowry of ten thousand francs.'

'*Mon Dieu!*' said Jeanne, clasping her hands. 'What is it Monsieur requires of me?'

'Tell me how I can help Mademoiselle. First, what is the trouble? Until I know that I can do nothing, for I am all in the dark.'

'Monsieur means well by Ma'm'selle?' she asked, with a last lurking doubt.

'What do you think yourself, Jeanne?' I asked, taking her hand and looking straight into her big black eyes.

'But yes, monsieur, I know it, and Louis says the same. You are a man to trust.'

'Then tell me—what is Ma'm'selle's trouble?'

'It is this, monsieur, and the reason why we do not speak of it is that it hurts us. It touches the family honour, and so the honour of all of us. We, down here, do not believe a word of it, but all the same it is there, and in Paris they say it is true. Ma'm'selle's brother, Monsieur Gaston, is in terrible disgrace. They say he has sold France—given away the secrets of the army—betrayed his country. *Mon Dieu!* I do not believe it, nor do any of us down here, but in Paris they believe it, and he has been degraded and deported, the poor boy, and such a fine boy too! Ah, it is impossible! and our poor Ma'm'selle, it is killing her. Now how can monsieur help?'

'And the priest—what is he after?' I asked.

'Monsieur l'Abbé Dieufoy?' She shrugged her shoulders expressively. 'He is trying to persuade Ma'm'selle to take the veil. Ma'm'selle is rich, you understand, monsieur, and the Church has always need of money,' and even in her whisper her voice rang hard and none too friendly to the grasping

brotherhood. 'Now tell me, monsieur, what can I do to help? Ma'm'selle is very dear to all of us, and if the Church takes her we all suffer too.'

'And how does Mademoiselle herself regard the matter, Jeanne?'

'Hortense tells us she is worn with grief. She will drop into their greedy mouths like a cherry if she is left to them long enough. It is endless, you understand, monsieur—morning, noon and night, day in, day out. At last she will be worn out, and she will say, "Very well, do anything you like, only leave me alone," then—good-bye to the world and she is gone, and we shall see her no more. She is meant for something better than that, monsieur.'

'Surely!' said I, pondering the situation.

'Tell me what I can do, monsieur.'

'This is all I can think of at the moment, Jeanne. Get word to Mademoiselle—Hortense would do—'

'She talks too much. I will go myself.'

'That will be much better—convey to Mademoiselle then, Jeanne, that the Englishman she saw in the train the other day would deem it the highest privilege of his life to be permitted to render her any assistance in his power, and—and—'

'I shall know what to say,' said Jeanne, with a knowing nod and a sparkle of the eyes. 'It will cheer Ma'm'selle to know that someone wants to help her.'

'God bless you, Jeanne! How soon will you see her?'

'To-morrow I will go to see my aunt, and I will see Ma'm'selle and speak with her.'

So I had made my first approach on the citadel where my heart was already prisoner, and I waited impatiently for the passage of the hours till I should hear how my envoy had fared.

It was late in the afternoon of the following day that Jeanne tripped softly up the stairs to my room, where I had been impatiently awaiting her for more than an hour.

Her eyes were a-sparkle and her face aglow with her rapid return from the château and the enjoyment of her mission.

‘Well, Jeanne, you have fared well?’

‘But yes, monsieur. . I think I have done all monsieur could wish.’

‘I hope Mademoiselle did not consider it an impertinence on the part of a stranger?’

‘She was very, very sad at first. Never have I seen her so sorrowful and hopeless looking. And then I told her of the picture, monsieur, and she was greatly surprised. And when I said you were the Englishman she had seen in the train she nodded and said, “I remember,” and a little light came into her eyes and a little colour into her cheek. And when I told her you were ready to lay down your life to help her—’

‘Did you say that?’

She nodded briskly. ‘When I told her that, she asked, “Does he believe Gaston guilty?” and I assured her you did not—’

‘But, Jeanne, I know nothing about it.’

‘And do you believe Ma’m’selle’s own brother could do such a thing, monsieur?’ she asked scornfully.

‘Certainly not, Jeanne.’

‘Very well then, that’s what I told her. I said you felt certain, with all the rest of us, that some horrible mistake had been made, and you were ready to do everything in your power to have it all made clear. Then Ma’m’selle kissed me and there were tears in her eyes. What lovely eyes she has, monsieur!’

I nodded. ‘And then?’

‘And then she said, “Tell monsieur that his sympathy has done me good, and I am grateful for it, and I shall not feel quite so lonely and helpless.” And she asked me to come and see her again, and said that I had done her good.’

‘Jeanne, you are angel.’

‘That is what Louis says, monsieur, but all the

same it is me myself in person whom he wants to marry.'

'I shall hope to dance at your wedding, Jeanne.'

'With Ma'm'selle?' She laughed merrily, and fled down the stair to see to the dinner.

CHAPTER VII

THE ARRIVAL OF THE DEVIL

NEXT day, as I sat smoking on the bench of Vaurel's cottage after breakfast, I noticed at once a change in the look of the château. It was no longer quite blind. Two of the brown wooden shutters upstairs were thrown back and the windows were wide open. It gave the house a more cheerful look, and I took it as a sign of the revival of hope and interest in life on the part of its mistress.

'*Tiens!*' said Vaurel when he noticed it, 'they are wakening up down there.'

We crossed in the punt and fished down the other side of the river below the weir. As we progressed slowly past the house, with the width of the river and the grassy stretch beyond between us and it, we saw the old priest and Mademoiselle slowly pacing the terrace, the old man talking earnestly, Mademoiselle listening, it seemed to me, perforce and with the manner of one who would have preferred being left alone.

The priest caught sight of us and stopped to look and possibly to wonder to his companion who we were. They were still pacing so, the priest turning sideways to her in his argumentation, Mademoiselle a little in front as though impatient of his importunity, when we passed out of sight round the bend. I could hear Vaurel growling curses on the 'crow' as long as

he could see him. He said nothing to me, but he was not fortunate in his fishing, and presently I almost fell over him where he lay in the grass, having thrown aside his rod in disgust.

'It does not go to-day,' he growled; 'the sight of old crow yonder pecking away at Ma'm'selle has upset my humour. *Dien de Dieu!* God made men and women, but the devil made the priests.'

'Tut! you are feeling bad, my friend. One would think you had suffered from their peckings yourself.'

'That I would not mind. But Ma'm'selle! it is different. And she all alone and with no one to help her. Oh, he will gobble her whole, lands and money and all—a big belly and a wide-open mouth has the Church, and an appetite that grows on feeding.'

I dropped my rod also, and sat down in the grass and filled my pipe and handed him my pouch.

'See here, Vaurel, my friend, let us talk. Tell me all you can about Gaston des Comptes. Can you see any daylight through the matter yourself?'

'*Sapristi!* I did not know you knew anything about the matter,' he said in some surprise.

'Of course I know about it. Why should I not know what all the world knows?'

He was evidently much puzzled at my sudden accession of knowledge, and filled his pipe between his knees ruminatingly, glancing doubtfully up at me now and again from under his brows.

'You do not believe he has done this thing?' I said.

'*Sacré nom de Dieu!* No!' he said with a sudden heat, for which I liked him all the more.

'Very well then. We are of the same opinion that Ma'm'selle's brother is the victim of—shall we say some terrible bl—'

'Or worse,' he growled. 'I tell you, monsieur, if the men at head-quarters are no better than the men who fooled us in the war, he's a rotten lot—ay, putrid! I've no doubt the country has been sold—is sold every

day of its life, but no Des Comptes ever sold his honour. *Mon Dieu!* why should he? For money? Not likely! He always had all the money he wanted.'

'And you think?'

'*Mon Dieu!* I don't know what to think. You see I know nothing of the men he was among. But I know him, ever since he was a baby, and I say he did not do this thing, and if I could find the man who has made the world believe he did—gr-r-r-r! I would wring his rascally head off.'

'The clue then can only be found in Paris?'

'I suppose so.'

'And you don't know the circumstances of the case?'

'I know practically nothing except that Gaston des Comptes never did a dishonourable thing.'

Beyond this rooted belief in the integrity of the house of Des Comptes, Vaurel had practically no knowledge of actual facts, and no amount of discussion availed to produce any further light on the case. He knew just what all the world knew, that after a trial *in camera* Gaston des Comptes had been condemned for treason, but of the grounds and proofs of the accusation the world knew nothing.

It was the day following this that Vaurel came down the path through the woods in a state of great excitement, with Boulot at his heels. He dropped on to the bench where I was sitting contemplatively watching the château through my smoke, and burst out,—

'*Mon Dieu, monsieur!* I have just seen the devil.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, *dame!* He came in by the morning train.'

'Oh?' said I again.

'You remember my telling you of Captain Lepard?'

'Let me see, which was he? You have told me so many interesting stories, my friend.'

'He was the one who was shot from behind at Wörth.'

'I remember.'

'Well, he is here. He is colonel now, I see.'

'The shooting was not very effectual, evidently.'

'As I told you, monsieur.'

'And so he's come after you at last.'

'No, monsieur, when I shoot a man I shoot him in front, unless he is a Prussian, of course.'

'And what do you suppose brings this gentleman here, and how does it affect you?'

'He has gone to the château!'

'The devil!'

'Exactly! That's it! That is what I said, monsieur.'

'What does he want at the château?'

'No good, whatever it is,' said Vaurel, with conviction. 'The man is brave enough when it comes to fighting, but he's a bad man and of an evil temper, and he was hated by his men. I have seen him more than once strike a man across the face with his cane at drill, and a man never forgets that kind of thing, monsieur. And as for the women—*mon Dieu!* he had a reputation.'

'What's he doing here, I wonder?' I said gloomily.

'Maybe he's on Monsieur Gaston's business.'

'That is possible.'

'If he is mixed up in it good-bye to Monsieur Gaston. And if it gives him any hold on Ma'm'selle the good God help her.'

'Why should it give him any hold on Mademoiselle?'

'I cannot say, but if it does he is the man to make the most of it.'

The arrival of this man, upon whom I had never set eyes, and of whom I had never heard except from Vaurel, and his presence at the château, caused me quite unaccountable discomfort. There might be a dozen good reasons for his being there, but the simple fact that he was there was sufficient to make me hate him. I took myself to task for feeling so and hated him all the more.

I saw him walking with Mademoiselle on the

terrace more than once, but he seemed to keep to the grounds of the château, and though I rambled about the village and along the road to the château gates I never got a nearer sight of him.

And now I was surprised by another most unexpected arrival, which strengthened tenfold all my determination to see the matter through and to be at hand in case Mademoiselle should find herself able to avail herself of any assistance I could offer her.

As Vaurel and I turned into the little inn one evening after a long day's fishing down the river towards Bessancy, we found a stranger at table and already half way through his dinner.

He replied to our 'Good day,' and then, with a laugh which was certainly not one of pleased surprise, he cried,—

'*Diable!* it is the Englishman again. How goes it, monsieur?'

'*Holà, Monsieur Roussel!*' I said, 'it is quite an unexpected pleasure to meet you once more.'

From the grin with which he greeted this I have no doubt he judged fairly accurately the amount of pleasure I felt at sight of him.

'Monsieur is stopping in the neighbourhood?' he asked.

'Yes, I am here for the fishing,' and I held up my string of trout.

'You have been fortunate,' he said. 'It is a pretty stream. I have come for some painting.'

'Ah! I thought you went in mostly for portraits?'

'On occasion,' he laughed. 'But it is not good to confine oneself to one line. I try my hand at historical subjects now and again'—and he grinned reminiscently—'and it is good also to come to Nature herself at times.'

Jeanne supplied us with our soup and we fell to with keen appetites.

'I am delighted to find you here,' he said presently.

'Your French is not of the most fluent, monsieur, but it is at all events understandable, whereas the language of the natives hereabouts is of the most barbarous,' and Vaurel scowled at him from under his brows.

I was thinking that from this man I could probably learn the actual facts of young Des Comptes's trouble, and I promised myself to cultivate him with that end in view. I was wondering also how soon he would broach the subject of Mademoiselle, for that she was the object of his visit I had not, of course, a moment's doubt.

He made no reference to her, however, but chatted away on matters Parisian in a way that drew a reluctant interest even from Vaurel, who had been inclined to treat him with the brusque indifference, amounting almost to rudeness, with which the man of the soil cloaks his native shyness in the presence of a stranger to whom he owes no allegiance, and whose assumption of superiority and whose very presence he somewhat resents.

Roussel retailed for our benefit all the latest doings of the various worlds of Paris, and when he had got down below the half world and well on to the quarter, Mère Thibaud, contrary to her custom, packed Jeanne off to bed and settled herself in her corner with a piece of knitting, to enjoy the juicy talk of the stranger. Jeanne, before she went, came over to me and whispered that she hoped I would not mind the gentleman having to share my room, and though I did not much relish the prospect I could but need acquiescence.

Roussel did most of the talking, and Mère Thibaud and Vaurel did most of the listening. For myself, his scandalous rattle had absolutely no interest, and still less attraction. It was probably his perception of this that made him turn to me at last and ask,—

'And Mdlle. X., monsieur, have you succeeded in making her acquaintance yet?' and at the word it

seemed to me that Vaurel pricked up his ears and became suddenly alert.

‘I have not, M. Roussel.’

‘Ah, you do not turn your opportunities to account.’

‘Perhaps so.’

‘She is here at the château, is she not?’

‘I believe so.’

‘And M. l’Abbé Dieufoy is there also to take care of her, is it not so?’

‘M. l’Abbé is there also.’

‘And Madame, the Mother Superior of the convent of the Sacred Heart at Combours, came down in the same train as myself, and has also gone to the château. Mademoiselle is to be well guarded. You are evidently looked upon with suspicion, monsieur.’

‘And M. le Colonel Lepard is also at the château,’ said Vaurel.

‘Lepard!’ cried Roussel, his face blackening at the news; ‘the devil!’

‘What does he want there, monsieur?’ asked Vaurel.

‘Want? What should he want but what they all want—Mademoiselle, or at all events Mademoiselle’s fortune.’

‘Lepard!’ he said again after a pause. ‘*Nom de Dieu!* When did he come?’

‘Three days ago.’

‘And Mademoiselle has been living in the same house with Colonel Lepard for three days. She won’t have a rag of reputation left.’

‘It is her own house, and the priest is there,’ I said curtly.

‘Oh—the priest!’ he said hotly. ‘The priest wants the money. Lepard wants both the money and Mademoiselle, or as much of them as he can get. Between them they are quite capable of making a bargain to divide the spoils.’

Vaurel was wriggling uncomfortably in his chair. Roussel's hidden meanings, more than his words, awoke in me the usual strong inclination to punch his head.

'He has got an evil reputation, this Colonel Lepard, you must know,' he said, swinging back his chair on to its hind legs and lighting another cigarette. 'It was his unpleasant attentions to Mademoiselle which got him and young Gaston to loggerheads. Lepard is on the general staff—'

'Rotten as punk,' interjected Vaurel.

'Ay, rotten as punk,' continued Roussel, 'and it was the general staff that accused Des Comptes and condemned him. I would bet a thousand to one Colonel Lepard had his finger in that pie. First he gobbles the brother in order to clear the way to the sister. And now he is here to gobble the sister—unless, *ma foi!* he has had his bite already—' and he added with a nasty laugh some expressions which were quite beyond my limited knowledge of the language.

And at that, Vaurel, whose anger had been steadily rising with every reference to the family, swept round his brawny arm, and Roussel rolled over on the floor, chair and all.

'Thousand devils! What is it, you crazy buffoon?' gasped the artist, spitting out bits of the cigarette which the spill had driven down his throat.

Vaurel stood over him, swinging his chair in his big hand. 'You dirty dog!' he said hotly, 'speak another word of Ma'm'selle and I'll knock your ugly brains out.'

'Who's saying anything against your Ma'm'selle?' said Roussel.

'You were, pig. You meant that Ma'm'selle was no better than she should be. If you open your mouth again I'll ram this chair leg down your throat.'

He stood over him for a couple of minutes, but

Roussel showed no intention of offering an opening for the chair leg, and at last Vaurel banged down his chair and sat on it with his back to the enemy.

'Things like that should not be allowed to live,' he growled to me; 'they are only fit to be squashed under an honest man's boot.'

At the first sign of trouble Mère Thibaud had discreetly betaken herself to her bedroom, so we were alone.

Roussel, with venomous glances at Vaurel, gathered himself gingerly into a sitting posture, and then lighted another cigarette and sat smoking it. Conversation was impossible after this little outbreak, and presently Vaurel rose and bade me good-night without another look at Roussel.

As soon as he was gone the other got up and to my surprise said quietly, 'He was right and I was wrong. Those things should not have been said. All the same, monsieur, it is dangerous to the reputation of Mademoiselle for this Colonel Lepard to be at the château.'

The mildness of his tone, where I expected an outburst of anger, astonished me greatly. I looked curiously at him, but his eyes were fixed gloomily on the fire, and it was probably only the reflection of the smouldering logs that gleamed in them. All the same, I made up my mind to warn my friend Vaurel to be on his guard, for, from the little I knew of Roussel, I believed him capable of repaying that hasty blow with compound interest.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEVIL'S JACKAL

I got little sleep that night. My brain was too busy turning over and over all these matters concerning

Mademoiselle, and seeking some way in which I could be of assistance to her.

What did Roussel mean by saying Lepard had gobbled Gaston des Comptes?

Vaurel's sudden explosion had driven it out of my mind, but in the night watches it started up and refused to be laid. What did he mean?

Taken literally, there was only one thing he could mean, and that was that Lepard had had the brother removed because he was a hindrance to his designs on Mademoiselle. And that pointed to a false accusation and an unjust condemnation. I felt myself getting into deep waters. And then what seemed to my restless brain a low laugh from the adjoining box bed, but which might only have been a snore or a gurgle, reminded me of Philippe the artist's assertion that Roussel was half crazy, and I doubted if any reliance could be placed on anything he said. I made up my mind, however, to sound him on the subject in the morning.

If only I could find out how to help Mademoiselle! What with the abbé, and the Mother Superior, and Lepard, she must be having trying times of it, and here was I, aching to spend myself in her service for love of her beautiful face and wonderful eyes, and yet unable to move hand or foot for her, an absolute outsider, though all my heart was in the game.

It was somewhat of a comfort to know that the interests of the various parties at the château were opposed to one another, at all events in part. The Church might combine against the Army, but I could not see any possibility of all three parties coalescing for the spoliation of Mademoiselle. And as this opposition of interests all made for delay, and as time has a way of straightening things out, it seemed to me that matters, bad as they were, might have been worse.

As I lay tossing restlessly in the close quarters of my box bed it seemed to me more than once that I

heard that low, chuckling laugh from the adjoining bunk, and it kept me from closing an eye for the rest of the night. Before morning I had made up my mind to a course which had been in it for some time past, and which indeed I had not adopted before simply out of consideration for Jeanne and her mother. But now that they had another lodger they would not feel it a defection on my part if I went to live down at Vaurel's little stone house by the river, as he had more than once suggested to me to do. We would still come up to the inn to dinner, and so I should still keep in touch with Jeanne for news from the château, and she and her mother would suffer no loss.

The news Jeanne obtained through Hortense since the arrival of the colonel had been of the meagrest. Lepard, she reported, had long conversations with Mademoiselle whenever he could get her by herself, but as a rule the priest put in an appearance as soon as he learned they were together. The priest and the colonel were most polite to one another, but Hortense's private opinion was that there was no love lost between them. Meanwhile Mademoiselle was pale and silent and—again in Hortense's private opinion—she looked as if she could not stand it very much longer.

Roussel was loafing about undecidedly after morning coffee when I suggested a stroll and a smoke. He accepted a cigar from my case and strolled moodily beside me.

'M. Roussel,' I said, 'will you pardon me referring for one moment to something you said last night?'

He shot a quick glance at me, and his dark face flushed hotly for a moment.

"It was this," I said quickly, lest he should mistake my meaning and take affront where none was intended. 'You said that this Colonel Lepard had gobbled Mademoiselle's brother. Would you mind telling me just what you meant by that?'

He puffed at his cigar in silence, and then said quietly,—

‘I would esteem it a favour, monsieur, if you would refer no more to last night. I have no recollection of saying any such thing.’

‘Oh, but you did without doubt. It has been in my mind all night.’

He shook his head. ‘If I did say anything so extremely foolish the sooner it is forgotten the better. I must have been slightly off my head.’

He declined to say anything more, though, from his manner, I believed that he could have given me the enlightenment I sought if he had chosen to do so.

However, he did not choose, and there was an end of it.

Presently Vaurel hove in sight along the road, and Roussel turned abruptly into the wood and left me.

‘Ha, ha!’ laughed Vaurel as he came near, ‘monsieur the artist has no desire to continue my acquaintance.’

‘I was trying to get at the meaning of something he said last night. It has been running in my head ever since.’

‘About Ma’m’selle?’

‘No, about her brother. He said Lepard had gobbled him. Now what did he mean by that?’

‘God knows. Did you ask him?’

‘Yes. He denied saying any such thing.’

‘I remember it,’ said Vaurel, casting back his thoughts, ‘it was just before I rolled him over.’

‘Yes.’

‘Sometimes a fool like that lets his mouth run away with him. *Tiens!* who have we here?’

It was a man in an officer’s undress uniform stepping briskly along towards us.

‘Reinforcements for the military party at the château,’ suggested Vaurel.

The officer stopped as he came opposite us and

touched his *képi* with careless finger, and asked, 'Can you tell me the way to the château, messieurs?'

His face was dark and keen, tanned to the colour of leather by some hot sun.

'Straight along through the village, monsieur,' said Vaurel, regarding him closely.

'Thanks!' and he strode on.

'Now who the deuce is that?' said Vaurel, looking after him. 'And what does he want at the château? The colonel, probably. A captain of artillery; has served in Algiers, I should say. Shifty eyes, not a man I would like to serve under. A colleague of M. le Colonel's, on the general staff, probably, and rotten like the rest of them. *Dieu!* What stories I have heard of the way they treat the men in Algiers. It's a wonder that any officer ever comes back alive.'

Vaurel was delighted when I told him I was coming to stop with him altogether. He carried down all my belongings during the morning, and procured for me a camp bedstead and bedding similar to the one he used himself, and I found it extremely comfortable and decidedly more airy than the box bed up at the inn. Boulot showed his approval by immediately adopting my bed as his sleeping place during the day, when he was not otherwise engaged, so we were all quite pleased with the change, and for myself it bore fruit of consequence almost immediately.

I told Vaurel of Roussel's quiet acceptance of his rough remonstrance, but at the same time expressed my own doubts as to the sincerity of it, and explained my reasons, and so dropped into the telling of my whole connection with Mademoiselle, and showed him the portrait, with which he was mightily taken, and only regretted that it was the work of 'that pig of an artist.'

I told him frankly that it was the charm of Mademoiselle's sweet face which had brought me to Cour-des-Comptes, through that accidental meeting in

the train, and that I was ready and anxious to render her every service in my power.

He carefully rammed the whole matter into his pipe with my tobacco, and smoked it thoughtfully, and then said,—

‘It is well! Monsieur is an honourable man, neither rotten, nor crazy, nor yet of the Church. I am with him.’

We fished up stream towards Bency that afternoon and went further than we intended. On turning homewards we climbed out of the valley to the high road for sake of the easier walking. It was quite dark before we passed the road leading up to the station, and as we drew near to the bridge over the river, Vaurel suddenly crushed me into the bushes by the path side and sank down beside me himself, and I heard voices approaching.

‘Well, in fine, my friend,’ said one voice, harsh and rasping, ‘if you talk till you’re blue I can do nothing more than I am doing. You see how matters stand. You will just have to wait till—’

‘*Dieu de Dieu!* wait, wait, wait! Haven’t I waited till my patience is in rags, and I am at my wits’ end for money?’

‘I also, but I can move no faster.’

‘Well, I can’t stand it. I shall blow my brains out or bolt if things go on this way.’

‘Don’t be a fool. Just sit tight and wait. My stake is bigger than yours, and I don’t intend to lose it—’

They passed out of hearing, and I was beginning to gather myself out of the uncomfortable heap into which I had tumbled, when Vaurel’s arm again flattened me down, as another figure flitted silently past us in the wake of the others.

‘Monsieur the artist,’ whispered Vaurel.

Then we picked ourselves up and went on our way.

‘If we could have heard all that those two have said to one another since they met to-day, we would

know a good deal more about some things than we do,' remarked Vaurel.

Which was no doubt very true, but left much to be desired from a practical point of view.

CHAPTER IX

AN INARTISTIC REPLY

HERE then was the position.

Mademoiselle was in dire distress over her brother's trouble, and was being urged or persuaded in various directions by the interested parties at the château.

Of these the most dangerous probably, certainly the most offensive from my point of view, was Colonel Lepard. If Roussel's indiscreet words meant anything at all, they meant that Lepard knew all about Gaston Des Comptes's affair, if indeed he had not had a hand in actually bringing it about. Such knowledge, in the hands of such a man, and with such an object in view as Mademoiselle and her fortune, was a thing to be feared. The Church, as represented by the Abbé Dieufoy and the lady who had arrived the previous day, might be trusted to fight to the utmost for the prize they coveted, and Mademoiselle was at all events safe in their hands.

What Roussel wanted there I could not imagine.

Vaurel and myself seemed the only disinterested parties in this many-sided conflict, and we were practically outsiders and had no standing in the matter beyond our keen desire to be of assistance to Mademoiselle. I might perhaps even have taken exception, had I been so inclined, to my own complete disinterestedness, but, at all events, I had but one wish, and that was for Mademoiselle's good, and I

doubt if as much could have been said of any of the others.

It was horribly galling to be able to do nothing but quietly wait and watch, but there was nothing else to be done. So I was fain to possess my soul in such patience as I could muster, and to hope for some turn of events which might give me an actual hand in the game.

Meanwhile the quiet life of the woods in Vaurel's company was restful and enjoyable, and I fished and smoked and accompanied him on his patrols, and watched the château, and waited for the wheel to turn. Vaurel and I still went up to Mère Thibaud's for dinner each night. Roussel showed a natural lack of appreciation of our company, and generally managed to dine before or after us. If by chance we overlapped one another at table, he nodded coldly to me, took no notice of Vaurel, and kept as much space between himself and us as possible. What he kept hanging about for was quite beyond us.

More than once we caught distant sight of him wandering about the woods, and more than once we were aroused in the night by angry demonstrations on the part of Boulot, who heard or dreamt of intruders.

More than once I warned Vaurel to keep a sharp eye all about him, for I distrusted the artist entirely, and he did not strike me as at all the kind of man to take a blow without attempting a blow in return. But Vaurel only laughed in his big hearty way, and promised to crack M. Roussel across his knee with one hand if he only gave him the chance.

It happened, however, that one day after breakfast we found ourselves entirely out of tobacco, and Boulot and I strolled up to the shop in the village for a supply of such as they had. Boulot never missed an opportunity of a village ramble with me, since his master objected to him going alone. It afforded him

the double pleasure of scaring all the children he met, and of getting away from the sight and smell of the water for a brief space, and the massive and imperturbable gravity with which he trotted along, looking neither to the right hand nor to the left, scattering the women and children without ever deigning to cast a look at them, always amused me greatly.

We delighted the old dame's heart by carrying off all her minute stock of really smokable stuff, and resumed our triumphant progress through the village.

We strolled quietly along till we reached the top of the path that led down through the trees to the river. We commenced the descent, and our feet made no sound on the carpet of fallen leaves. Boulot trotted on in front, and as he rounded the corner of the house I saw his ears stand suddenly upright, and he bristled all over. I heard a heavy splash in the water, and a surprised yell cut short off in the middle. Boulot's short tail stiffened like an iron spike, the stout hind legs spurned the earth, and he launched himself at something in front. I got round just in time to see him fasten on to Roussel's throat with a muffled howl, then dog and man went over backwards into the water, and Boulot gave a disgusted snort as they went under. A dozen feet further out Vaurel rose with a choking cry and began thrashing the water helplessly with his one arm, and I saw that he was like to drown. I leaped in and made my way to him, leaving Boulot and Roussel to settle their quarrel as best they could.

Vaurel grabbed me spasmodically, and I shouted into his ear, 'Lie still. You're all right. I can swim like a fish. Let go, man, or you'll drown us both.'

I got him by the back of the neck at last and held his head above water, then swam with the current and gradually edged him in to the bank, and at last our feet touched bottom and we crawled ashore. Vaurel sat coughing and choking with the water he had swallowed, while I looked anxiously for the other two.

and presently, down stream in the direction of the weir, I saw a black object rolling helplessly along. It was Master Boulot, or his body. Of Roussel I could see nothing. I sped along the bank. If there was any spark of life in the old dog he would have no chance if the undertow got hold of him. I got below him and swam out and managed to lay hold of him just in time. He seemed to me to be dead, but I dragged him ashore. While I sat panting on the bank I held him upside down, and pressed the water out of him, and worked him like a pair of bellows, and blew the water out of his nose. There was a piece of a collar and necktie between his teeth and I could not get it out. I worked away on first aid lines, for I was loth to let the plucky old fellow slip away if there was any possible hope of recovering him. I made another attempt to pull the plunder from between his teeth and was at length cheered by a vicious snap after a bit of the tie as I tore it away. Then he opened one eye and heaved a big sigh and sneezed, and when I put him on to his feet he lay down and was very sick. I let him cough the water out of him till he could cough no more, and then I picked him up, snuffling and snorting, and carried him home in my arms.

Vaurel was lying on the bank where we landed, still coughing up the water he had swallowed.

'Dead?' he asked, as I came up with Boulot.

'No, he's coming round, but it was a pretty close shave.'

'What was it? What happened?'

'Do you really mean to say you don't know?' I asked.

'I know nothing. I had thrown out a line to pass the time, and was sitting on my heels watching it, and then an earthquake struck me in the back and then I seemed to be trying to swallow the river. Seems to me I must have been dozing.'

'It was that rascal Roussel. Boulot and I saw him. Heave you into the water, but we were too late to stop him. Boulot got him by the throat and they tumbled in after you. I wonder where he's got to. Have you seen anything of him?'

'*Sacré Dieu!* no!' he said, getting up. 'I didn't know he was there. The miserable, to sneak on a man like that! But if Boulot got his teeth in he's finished. And but for you, monsieur, Boulot and I would be finished too,' and he gripped my hand and shook it heartily.

The miller, in a white blouse, with his face and beard thick with flour dust, came along the river bank with one of his men to ask what the trouble had been, and on our telling him sent off his man to the village to inform M. Juliot, the *gendarme*, so that everything might be in order. Then he hurried back himself to shut down one of his sluice-gates, which had been open, so that if the body of the artist had not yet got through it might be the more easily found. Presently Juliot came majestically down the wood path with half the village at his heels. It was evident that he did not often get such a chance of distinguishing himself as this, and he made the most of it.

He questioned us magisterially and made notes in his pocket-book. He looked at Boulot who was lying on my bed, the centre of a widening damp spot. But Boulot had had too much water to take any interest in *gendarmes*. He only wrinkled up his brows and his nose and snuffled disgustedly and curled himself up the tighter, and Juliot decided not to press investigations in that quarter.

Then a party crossed in the punt to the other bank, and we all set off with sticks and poles to search for the body. But it was not to be found, and after poking and rooting about the weir for the best part of an hour, the searchers streamed away down the

river in a long straggling tail, and in time came straggling back as empty as they went.

Mère Thibaud had a full house that night, and nothing was talked of but the crazy artist's attempt on Prudent Vaurel. Boulot sat under his master's chair and received the distant homage of the villagers with dignified contempt, and sneezed and snuffled at intervals as though the recollection of the cold plunge was still heavy on him.

The villagers decided that the artist was undoubtedly dead and that it served him right. The body would rise in time and that would be the end of it. They had never liked him. He was too stuck up and treated them as if they were dirt.

M. Juliot, as the representative of law and order, was in great form and very much in evidence. He condescended to take coffee and cognac fine with us, and discussed the case didactically. He was of opinion that something ought to be done, and was half inclined to think that failing the prosecution of Roussel—for the best of reasons—for assaulting Vaurel, Boulot ought to be proceeded against in some way or other for assaulting Roussel. It was insufferable that the whole village should be terrorised by the great animal. 'Why, it was only a week or two ago since he killed the sheep dog up at La Garaye, and next week it might be any one of them. *Mon Dieu!* yes, it might be me, myself, Juliot of the *gendarmerie*—'

'All right; you take him along, Juliot, my friend,' said Vaurel, complacently. 'Here he is, quiet as a lamb; just take him right along and lock him up, and God help you in the doing of it, for nobody else will, and you'll want all the help you can get.'

'It's a veritable devil,' said Juliot, looking askance at Boulot, but not offering to touch him. 'When he's killed somebody else, M. Vaurel, you'll regret it, but then it'll be too late.'

'You leave Boulot alone, Juliot, and Boulot will leave

you alone. If that fool of a sheep dog hadn't flown at him he'd have been alive now, and if the crazy artist hadn't flown at me he'd have been alive now. It's just a bit dangerous to touch either of us, isn't it, old boy?' said Boulot's master, pulling one of his ears till his great white fangs showed and made the crowd shiver.

M. Juliot helped himself to some more cognac, and expressed his feelings in a loud '*Eh, b'en!*' which no doubt covered many unexpressed thoughts on the subject, and then relapsed into silence profound if not eloquent.

CHAPTER X

AN ANGEL'S VISIT

AND now for the fruitage of my move to the little house by the river.

Vaurel was an early riser and was usually away to the woods after pigeons for the château very soon after sun-up.

He was away the morning after our adventure with Roussel before I woke, and after a delightful plunge in the river I set the coffee pot in the cove of white ashes on the hearth, and sat down on the wooden bench with my pipe to await his return. Boulot had elected to stop with me instead of following his master. He had not forgotten yesterday, and he disapproved of my bathing, and scuttled half way up the hillside to await developments. He evidently thought me crazy and feared to be the next victim of my mania. It was not till I was seated on the bench in the morning sunshine, with the water still in my hair, and the glow of it in my blood, feeling fit and strong and well content with the world—except as regards Mademoiselle—that Boulot deemed it safe to

come gingerly down the path and sniff round me doubtfully, and then flopped down at my feet with a sneeze of disgust at my late idiotic proceedings.

I was making him squirm apprehensively by suggesting that an occasional bath was good even for a gentlemanly and well-bred bull-dog, especially when he expected to sleep on another gentleman's bed, when the short ears pricked up suddenly and the great head rose from the short thick paws and looked steadily past me along the side of the hill. Then I too caught a rustling among the leaves, and following Boulot's steadfast look, I saw the figure of a woman approaching the house through the trees, and in another moment Mademoiselle stood before me—the lovely face and great true eyes which had wrought themselves into my heart—Mademoiselle herself.

The beautiful face indeed carried the shadow of her troubles, but her eyes were more like the eyes of the portrait, for they sought mine with the touch of questioning shyness which had captivated my soul at the Salon.

Boulot and I sprang up together.

'Down, Boulot!' I said. 'He will not hurt you, Mademoiselle,' and in my surprise I spoke in English.

And it was in English that she answered me, and with scarce a trace of accent. 'Boulot and I are old friends,' she said, and stooped to caress him.

She wore a long brown cloak and the hood was drawn over her head. She loosed the cloak and the hood fell back, and she sat down on the bench while I stood before her. My heart was beating furiously at her coming, for it could only mean that she came to ask my help or at all events my counsel, and—whatever it meant—she had come. I was still gazing at her with all my heart in my eyes when she looked up at me timidly, and said—and the sweet, soft voice was all in keeping with her face,—

'If my coming here seems to you an unmaidenly

thing to do, monsieur—' she stopped as though for my name.

'Hugh Lamont is my name, Mademoiselle,' I said, 'and the dearest wish of my life is to be of service to you.'

'I thank you,' she said. 'I am surrounded by—difficulties'—I think she had been going to say 'enemies,' but hesitated to express her fears so openly—'and I scarce know where to turn or whom to trust. You have heard about my brother—'

'I have heard, but I do not believe.'

'It heartens me to hear that someone besides myself believes in him. Colonel Lepard promises to get him released—they have sent him away to New Caledonia. I do not want him to be released, monsieur, I want him cleared. You understand—'

'Yes, I understand, Mademoiselle, and cleared he shall be if only you will tell me how to go to work.'

'Oh,' she said, twining her fingers tightly together, 'I will tell you all I know and perhaps you can help me. Colonel Lepard says he will get Gaston released if I will marry him, and I detest him. Father Dieufoy says there is no hope, and my only refuge is a convent, and now he has got the Duchesse de St Ouen down to assist him in persuading me. But I cannot trust them wholly. I cannot forget that I am rich and that the Church is always poor. What am I to do, monsieur? I am only a girl and they are too strong for me. I come to you because you are an Englishman and I am half English. My dear mother was from Warwickshire, and when Jeanne Thibaud told me there was an Englishman here who offered me his help my heart was glad. Though why—ah, yes, I remember—the portrait Monsieur Roussel painted for the Salon—Jeanne told me of it. How did you get it, monsieur?'

Without going into particulars I told her I had bought it, and stepping into the little house I

unlocked my portmanteau and brought it out in its case and unrolled it before her.

'I value it more than anything else in the world,' I could not help saying, and she regarded it steadfastly and in silence.

'Do you know that M. Roussel has been here, Mademoiselle?'

'M. Roussel?' she said with a startled look. 'What does he want here?'

'I don't know what he wants. He said he came to paint.'

She shook her head, and said as naïvely as a child,—

'Monsieur Lamont, I do not think Monsieur Roussel is a good man. I wonder what he is here for?'

I thought I could have told her what brought him, but I deemed it better not.

'He is not here now, Mademoiselle. He fell into the river yesterday, and we have not seen him since. They are afraid he is drowned.'

'That was what brought all the people down the banks yesterday?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'And they did not find him?'

'No, they did not find him.'

'But he may still be alive?'

'He may be, but it is unlikely. When he went into the river Boulot's teeth were in his throat.'

'Where was he stopping?'

'At Madame Thibaud's in the village.'

'And he has not been there since?'

'He would hardly dare to show himself. He knocked Prudent Vaurel into the river and tried to drown him. Then Boulot got him by the throat, and that is the last that any of us saw of him.'

The thought of it all caused her evident discomfort.

'If you will tell me all you know about this matter of your brother's, Mademoiselle,' I said, to draw her thoughts elsewhere, 'I will do everything in my

power to set things right. I know at present only what the world knows.'

'I'm afraid I know but little more. Colonel Lepard knows everything. Gaston and he quarrelled—about—' she stammered.

'I know,' I said encouragingly.

'And when Gaston was arrested, not very long afterwards, Colonel Lepard came to me and promised to help him, but—'

'But you do not trust Colonel Lepard.'

'I do not. He practically made it a condition that I should do what Gaston, I knew, would never have me do, and—and—'

'And the colonel's promised help was not forthcoming.'

She nodded. 'I hate him,' she said in a low, vehement voice; 'but for Gaston's sake, and to clear his good name, I would willingly sacrifice myself.'

'That must not be,' I said, vehement in my turn. 'It shall not be, Mademoiselle. Promise me you will never think of such a thing.'

'I trust you, Monsieur Lamont—for yourself, and because those whom I can trust, though they cannot help me, tell me you are an English gentleman, and in helping me you, at all events, have no end of your own to serve.'

I thought differently, but it was too soon to tell her so.

'Now, how can I help you, Mademoiselle? It is evident that Colonel Lepard holds the key to your brother's troubles. In what way can I force it from him?'

'I know so little,' she said, 'except what he himself has told me.'

'And that we cannot depend on.' It was very pleasant to find myself associated with her in this way.

Mademoiselle fell suddenly silent, and I saw from her knitted brow that she had got a new idea and

was working it out in her own mind. She looked up hesitatingly at me once or twice as though in two minds whether to voice her thought or not.

'Mr Lamont,' she said at last, 'I am going to ask a strange thing of you,' and I saw that her eyes were pathetically bright and very near to overflowing. 'You will not misjudge me?'

'I could not, Mademoiselle.'

'Then I beg of you to come and stop at the château. I am only a girl and I am one against three, and I am not strong enough to stand against them. Will you come?'

'That is but a very little thing to ask of me, Mademoiselle.'

'One cannot tell what it may lead to,' she said, and my heart hopefully agreed with her, 'but I shall feel not quite so much alone in the world. I know—I know,' she said, with a break in her voice, 'I am passing all bounds, but you will let my necessity excuse me.'

'If you knew what pleasure it gives me to be of any service to you,' I said. 'Now under what guise shall I come?'

'I was thinking—you might be an English friend of my mother's— Stay! be a cousin! That will be best and no one can question your right to be there. You have heard of our troubles, and in Paris you learned I was here and followed me to see if you could be of any assistance to me.'

'Capital!' I said, and then, suddenly remembering. 'But what of the old priest? He saw me in the train that day. Will he know me again?'

Her face fell. 'I did not think of that,' she said despondently.

'I can get over that,' I said with a sudden inspiration.

Here Boulot's bits of cars pricked up again, and the nose of the punt ran softly into the bank, and Vaurel stepped ashore with a bunch of pigeons

hanging down at each side of his neck. He had been up the river towards Bency and so we had not seen him coming.

'Ma'm'selle!' he said deferentially, and stood before her, cap in hand.

'Prudent, *mon ami*,' she said, with a brighter look in her face, 'I have been making discoveries in your absence.' Vaurel cast a deprecating glance towards the door of his house. 'No, not about you, *mon ami*. About M. Lamont here. Do you know that he is a relative of my mother?'

'*Dieu de Dieu!* You don't say so, Ma'm'selle?' he said, in huge surprise.

'And he is coming to stay at the château, as is only fitting.'

'Truly!' said Vaurel, not over-joyfully. 'But it is I that will miss him. We have been good friends, monsieur and I. I know a man when I meet one, and so does monsieur. Is it not so, monsieur?'

'That is so, Vaurel, and we shall be none the less friends, I hope, because I am shifting my quarters.' But Vaurel shook his head doubtfully.

'I must go,' said Mademoiselle, 'or they will miss me. When will you arrive, Monsieur Lamont?'

'By the evening train to-day. I shall run up to Rennes and will send you a telegram from there, and you can send the carriage to meet me.'

'Good!' and she clapped her hands like a child. 'I feel better than I have done since I came here. Adieu, Prudent! *Au revoir*, Monsieur Lamont. Good-bye, Boulot!' and she patted the big head which wrinkled up to her touch, and then she stepped lightly away into the wood.

'Monsieur is in luck,' said Vaurel, when she had gone.

'Mademoiselle is in trouble, my friend. And if I can do anything to assist her I am going to do it. I can count upon you if I need help?'

‘To the last drop of my blood—for Mademoiselle,’ he said.

CHAPTER XI

COUSIN—COUSINE

AFTER breakfast, which was less cheerful than usual, Vaurel shouldered my big portmanteau, and took it and me by a circuitous route to the station, just in time to catch the mid-day train to Rennes. There I sent off to Mademoiselle a telegram announcing my arrival that evening. Then I went up to my hotel to get some things I wanted, and which I had not hitherto needed at Cour-des-Comptes, and then I went to a barber’s and had my moustache and beard shaved off, and if I had not known my own eyes I should not have known myself when I looked in the glass.

I came down by the evening train, and Louis Vard put my portmanteau into the waiting carriage without recognising me, and I was bumped away in the cumbrous old rattletrap in the highest of spirits to the château.

The driver signalled our arrival by a volley of pistol cracks from his huge whip, and Mademoiselle herself came out into the big hall to welcome me. There was a sparkle in her eye which it did my heart good to see, but she stopped short at sight of my altered face and stood doubtfully.

‘Why, Cousin Denise,’ I said in English, holding out both hands to her; ‘it is so long since we met that I believe you hardly know me.’

‘Is it really you, Cousin Hugh?’ she said, her face colouring beautifully. ‘You are so changed that at first I hardly knew you.’

‘I hope I do not put you to any inconvenience by taking you unawares in this way, cousin?’

‘I am delighted to see you,’ she said. ‘How did you know I was here?’

‘Well, you see, I heard—certain things, and ran over to Paris, and there I found you had come down here, so I came on to see if I could be of any service to you.’

‘That was very good of you. Now you must be starving. We dine in half an hour. Hortense, show Monsieur Lamont to his room. *A bientôt, mon cousin!*’

Within the half hour I was back in the great hall, wondering in which direction the salon lay. Hortense came tripping to my assistance from a dark passage and showed me to the door, opening it as she knocked.

‘Monsieur!’ she announced, and I found myself in the presence of the enemy. Mademoiselle came forward at once and formally introduced me.

‘Madame la Duchesse de St Ouen—Monsieur Lamont!’

The face of a statue in the coif of a nun—marble white, thin-lipped, austere eyes discreetly veiled. Madame the Duchesse did not favour me with even half a glance, nor did I ever at any time see her looking at anybody or anything, but I have an idea that all the same, in some occult way, she kept a pretty keen eye on everything that went on.

‘M. l’Abbé Dieufoy’—Mademoiselle’s fellow-traveller in the train—but not nearly so grim-faced and ascetic-looking as when last I saw him. His manner was suave and polished, his eyes keen as a hawk’s, and he made no pretence of veiling them.

‘M. le Colonel Lepard’—big, burly, bull-necked, bullyish, approaching the brutal. His strong red face adorned with a sword-cut over the temple, and a black moustache and imperial—a soldier to the finger

tips, which, by the way, I could not help noticing during dinner, would have been none the worse for a little attention.

I bowed solemnly to these good people, and take credit to myself for keeping so grave a face when my heart was full of laughter.

The priest made some remark to me in French and I turned on Mademoiselle a face of deprecation and anxious inquiry.

'Will you please apologise to the gentleman for my lack of knowledge of French, cousin,' I said, and with one quick, amused glance at me, she did so in the demurest fashion possible.

Here Hortense announced that Ma'm'selle was served and we passed into the dining-room, Mademoiselle seating me at her right hand, the priest being on her left.

I am bound to say I enjoyed myself exceedingly, inasmuch as I knew that my presence there must be extremely distasteful to the other three, and that I was at the same time contributing somewhat to the enjoyment, or at all events to the lightening of the depression, of Mademoiselle.

As I showed a most lamentable ignorance of the beautiful language, I was free to rattle away to my heart's content to my fair neighbour, about Warwickshire, where I had never been, and about numerous mutual acquaintances whom we had neither of us ever met. Meanwhile, I was noting and absorbing everything I could concerning my fellow-guests, and forming my own opinions about them.

Madame Mère ate in silence and as though the very opening of her mouth to admit food were a concession to the world and a falling from grace. She had pudgy, ill-shaped hands, and showed her consciousness of them, and thereby a certain lack of absolute detachment from things earthly, by keeping them, when not in use, folded meekly inside her

ample sleeves. She sat, for the most part, a picture of meek resignation and abnegation, qualities which, I was later on to learn, were not the most conspicuous in her character. Her most devoted adherent never could have claimed for Madame Mère that she was an absolutely exhilarating companion at a feast.

M. l'Abbé had one prominent vice. He took snuff. He took it freely and constantly, but with an elegance of manner which came near to elevating it into a virtue. Whenever M. l'Abbé indulged Madame Mère's marble face twinged as with a sudden spasm of toothache, and then her lips moved rapidly, though almost invisibly, in silent prayer. It was really very funny. It seemed to me that at each snuffle her mind let slip an imprecation—something quite mild, of course, such as 'Oh, dear!' or 'Disgusting!'—and then, recognising her lack of charity, she hastened to pacify Heaven with a prayer.

Colonel Lepard made me think of a hungry dog held back from its bone. He spoke little and drank freely of the Burgundy, and smacked his lips over it.

Many times during dinner, when I turned to speak to Mademoiselle, her eyes showed me that, brief as our previous acquaintance had been, she was still not quite accustomed to my altered looks.

When the ladies withdrew Colonel Lepard accepted a cigar from my case with a somewhat ill grace, and smoked it with a relish which he tried hard to conceal. Apparently he knew no English. But M. Dieusoy spoke the barbarous language to a small extent, and he and I had quite an amusing time of it. Indeed, much as he, no doubt, regretted my appearance on the scene, from matters of policy, it seemed to me that from a social point of view he looked upon me as an improvement on the colonel, and was inclined to cultivate my acquaintance. Now and again, when those keen eyes of his rested questioningly upon me, as the long white finger and thumb raised the

pungent morsel to his nose, I had an uncomfortable moment of doubt as to whether he had not at last recognised me as not quite the utter stranger I claimed to be. But the searching look passed and I sat in comfort again.

So here was I, in this most extraordinary fashion, installed as chief guest in the castle of my desire, enjoying myself greatly, it is true, but never for one moment losing sight of the reason for my being there, and desirous only of furthering the wishes of the fair châtelaine. For she held my heart in sway as completely as she ruled in this great house of hers.

M. l'Abbé waited with the utmost politeness till the colonel had smoked his cigar to the last half inch and had regretfully laid that down. Then he rose, saying, 'Mademoiselle no doubt awaits us,' and led the way into another room on the other side of the great hall.

It was a large room with four long windows opening on to the terrace, and by reason of its size it gave one the impression of being somewhat sparsely furnished—the spindle-legged chairs and tables and uninviting couches looking stiff and lonely on the great expanse of highly-polished floor.

The evening was not cold, but, for the sake of its companionableness probably, Mademoiselle had had a bright fire of split logs built on the hearth and she was sitting in front of it with a book. Madame Mère had retired, for purposes of meditation, no doubt, and our company felt a trifle warmer and less austere for her absence.

'Ah, Mademoiselle, you are alone?' said M. Dieufoy.

'In the best of good company, M. l'Abbé,' she smiled. 'Madame Mère has gone to bed.'

'She is an early riser, I believe,' he said, with an answering smile, from which I gathered that madame's exceeding piety palled somewhat even upon him.

'If madame were a soldier, now,' growled Lepard, and the idea was so incongruous, and needed so vigorous a stretch of the imagination to compass it, that M. Dieufoy smiled again, 'she would take advantage of being beyond the sound of the *réveillé* and would lie as long as she could of a morning.'

'Madame carries her *réveillé* within her, M. le Colonel,' said the abbé, 'and she never gets beyond reach of its call.'

'*Mon Dieu!* she does not seem to me absolutely to enjoy life,' said the colonel with a shrug.

'In her own way,' said the abbé, 'though the signs of it may not be very apparent. But we all have our own ideas of enjoyment. You, my dear colonel, have just enjoyed a very good cigar. I myself take pleasure in this pinch of snuff. Madame takes offence at both. Mademoiselle, on the contrary, graciously shows no dislike to either.'

'I like the smell of a good cigar,' said Mademoiselle, 'but I don't think I should like snuff. I have never tried it.'

'Pardon! Permit me, Mademoiselle,' said M. l'Abbé, tendering his box with a bow of extremest elegance.

The colonel laughed as Mademoiselle's pretty nose wrinkled up uncompromisingly.

'—*cré nom de Dieu!*' he cried, 'but I would like to see madame try one of monsieur's cigars. We should be deprived of her company for a week.'

A curious piece of furniture, from whose highly-polished sides the firelight flickered in rosy gleams, excited my curiosity. It looked like a big, flat, polished box on four high thin legs, but from the pedals below I surmised that it might be a piano, though I had never seen one like it before.

Denise saw me looking at it.

'Is it a piano?' I asked. 'Would you not play us something?'

‘It’s a piano of a kind,’ she said with a smile, ‘but I doubt if it is usable, unless, indeed, Hortense is in the habit of practising on it when we are not here, which is more than likely. In fact, I should be somewhat surprised if she did not.’

She went forward and opened the little oblong box in front of it.

‘I have not played a note,’ she said musingly, ‘since—’ and her slim fingers dropped doubtfully on to the flat, faded keys. They were yellow with age, and the sounds they produced were quite in keeping with their looks—thin and wiry and ancient, but the instrument was in fairly good tune, from which we imagined that Miss Hortense had probably made some progress in her musical studies.

As chord followed chord I slipped a chair into position and she sank into it, and by degrees the notes shaped themselves into a sweet, soft tune, somewhat melancholy indeed, as was her mood, but to me, who had but little knowledge of music, the sweetest I had ever heard.

Colonel Lepard and M. Dieufoy did not, I imagine, altogether approve of this diversion of mine. They both undoubtedly appreciated the fact that the nearer Mademoiselle drew to me the further must she be withdrawn from any influence they could exercise over her, and I have no doubt they both devoutly—or probably in the case of the colonel anything but devoutly—wished me further.

They sat silent for a time listening to the music, and then Colonel Lepard growled disapprovingly,—

‘You will disturb madame at her devotions, Mademoiselle.’

The abbé, on the other hand, with a finer sense of diplomacy, testified his appreciation by clapping his palms lightly together, and saying softly, ‘Bravo! bravo! You have done us good already, M. Lamont.’

All the same I had the feeling that he also would

have been much better satisfied if I had never come to the château.

Mademoiselle's eyes were fixed musingly on the yellow keys, and her white hands continued gliding over them almost unconsciously as it seemed to me, though sweetest music followed their every touch, and to two of us, at all events, the sound of it was at once soothing and exhilarating. For Mademoiselle herself enjoyed it, once she had started, almost as much, I believe, as I did myself. Her face, when at last she looked up, was brighter and more hopeful.

'This has done me good,' she said, 'but I have tired you all out. You should have stopped me sooner.'

'On the contrary, I, for one, would like you to go on all night,' I said.

'We must leave some for another time,' she said, and closed the piano, and picked up her book, and bade us all good-night.

My position among the contending factions in the house was very similar to that of the small boy who persists in obtruding his unwelcome presence in the parlour where his sister and his future brother-in-law desire only to be left alone.

I disconcerted them all, and upset their plans, whatever they were, and all in the most innocently unconscious way, and from my extreme ignorance of their language I was impervious to all hints and innuendoes. As an accepted member of the family they were all fully aware that Mademoiselle's best interests must be paramount with me, which was not absolutely the case with themselves. Before I arrived there were two factions in the house. Now there were three, for the manner of the others showed plainly that they quite understood that Mademoiselle would make me acquainted with all that was going on and would claim my assistance.

Monsieur Dieufoy was always politeness personified with an inclination even towards friendliness.

Colonel Lepard's black humour seemed to darken with every hour of my stay.

Madame Mère, frosty saint, bore with me in silent resignation and never showed the slightest desire to break the ice either by word or look.

And Mademoiselle! Perhaps it was that Mademoiselle felt constrained as hostess to mitigate by every means in her power the unsympathetic atmosphere in which I found myself, and so deliberately overstepped the bounds and conventions in which she had doubtless been brought up. Perhaps she found a new and hitherto untasted delight in doing so. Perhaps she knew already that my feeling for her was neither cousinly nor that of simple friendship. But, whatever it was, she was utterly and absolutely charming, and my heart went out to her more and more with every hour I spent in her company.

For two delightful hours we paced the terrace together the morning after my arrival, and spoke of many things and learned much of one another. Mademoiselle had given me her confidence, and it was her nature to trust completely where she trusted at all.

Colonel Lepard gloomed like a thunder-cloud.

M. Dieufoy snuffed voluminously and regarded us much as a schoolmaster might unobserved watch his pupils plotting mischief.

Madame the Duchesse paid us not the slightest attention, but doubtless, as I have said, kept a sharp eye on all our delinquencies.

Altogether it was an extremely enjoyable state of affairs, and braced one like a tonic or a stiff sea breeze.

Indeed this strange and complete isolation from the world, and the close casting together within such narrow bounds, induced a friendliness and comradeship between Mademoiselle and myself akin to that of shipboard life, and the hours taught us to know one another better than days and weeks of ordinary meetings could have done.

No doubt we were both more or less high strung by the peculiar circumstances of the case, and thereby dropped almost unconsciously the conventional veils and masks which at other times and under ordinary circumstances we must have worn. But however it came about, it is certain that by the middle of that second day I felt as though I had known Mademoiselle for half a lifetime, and the greatest desire of my heart was to know her still better for the other half.

A more delightful cousin it would not be possible to imagine, but at intervals she would suddenly remember that our relationship was only two days old, and purely fictional at that. Then for a brief space a shy reserve would fall upon her, which, however, only served to heighten the piquant charm of her manner as some new idea struck her and she forgot to be reserved, and poured out her thoughts as frankly and freely as if our supposed common ancestors had really once existed.

At dinner I inquired as to fishing and shooting in the neighbourhood, and Mademoiselle offered to send for Prudent Vaurel next day to give me information on these subjects.

That first day was passed by the parties of the other part in a state of surprised but well-dissembled protest, while Mademoiselle and I paced the terrace in cousinly converse and rounded off the angles and corners of our new-formed acquaintance.

But on the following morning, when we essayed to continue this most enjoyable polishing process, Colonel Lepard's feelings got the better of him, and drove him to smoke his cigar on the terrace at the same time. That did not interfere with our enjoyment, however. Indeed I am afraid I must confess to a certain amount of amusement, in which I think Mademoiselle quietly shared, at the irritation and annoyance expressed in the gallant warrior's clouded face, which was puckered up in disgust, at this unlooked-for inter-

ference with his plans, into something very like a scowl.

The Church party made no sign; their diplomacy was of different quality and finer temper than the colonel's, and in their generation they were wise, inasmuch as they excited no presently active hostility in our minds against them.

In the afternoon Vaurel came up to the house with Boulot at his heels.

Boulot made for me at once, and testified his delight at our meeting once more with snorts and grimaces and stolid uprearings of himself against me, so that Mademoiselle felt constrained to say, 'Why, you might be old friends. I do believe he knows you're an Englishman.'

'I shouldn't be a bit surprised,' I said gravely. "'Fee-fi-fo-fum!' you know—" He smells the blood of an Englishman."

The colonel was on the terrace, and Boulot, when he had finished with me, took an emphatic saunter in his direction, just to see what manner of man he was. But the colonel did not, for some reason or other, entirely satisfy him. The great dog rumbled round the military legs like a miniature thunder-storm, drew his breath in so hard that his big white fangs showed, and blew it out again so vehemently that it sounded like a disgusted sneeze, and then came heavily back to us, while the colonel called him a sacred devil and walked hastily away in the other direction.

To Vaurel's intense amusement Mademoiselle demurely introduced me as her cousin, acted as interpreter between us on the questions of fishing and shooting, and finally commended me to his care to be put into the way of obtaining such sport as might be expected to satisfy the cravings of my British nature. And so, in the most natural way possible, Vaurel and I came into touch again.

We set out at once to try one of the pools down the river, and when we had got well out of hearing of the house Vaurel let out his pent-up laughter and roared with delight.

'*Mon Dieu, monsieur!*' he said, 'but it is magnificent. There you are in the midst of them, upsetting all their plans, and making them all as mad as bears, I'll be bound. And you don't understand French, and, thousand thunders! do you know, monsieur, at first I did not know you. It is magnificent!'

'But so far, my friend, I have not advanced matters at all by being there.'

'Time enough! that will come all right, monsieur. Meanwhile, for myself, I do not like this Monsieur le Colonel Lepard.'

'Nor does Boulot apparently.'

'The little Boulot is not often at fault. If Boulot dislikes a man I do not like him either. And meanwhile also, monsieur, I can see that Ma'm'selle is the happier for your being there.'

'The only trouble is that I am making no progress in the matter of Monsieur Gaston.'

'Any day you may tumble across something, monsieur, and meanwhile it is good for Ma'm'selle to have you there.'

'No trace has been found of Monsieur Roussel, I suppose?'

'Not a scrap of him. He'll come to the top in time, but how he escaped all our poles I cannot make out.'

'Maybe he climbed out and got away.'

'Not if Boulot once got his teeth in as you say he did, monsieur. Boulot never lets go, and besides, where is he? No, Monsieur Roussel is down there,' he said, pointing down into the water, 'and sometime or other he'll come up, and may I not be there to see. He will not be nice to look upon.'

However, we saw nothing of him, and we had a fair afternoon's fishing, but I confess the thought of

eating the fish which might possibly have fed upon M. Roussel did not commend itself to me.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE OLD MILL

COLONEL LEPARD'S overbearing spirit chafed sorely at the disarrangement of his ideas which my arrival and my persistent monopolisation of Mademoiselle's society occasioned. I judged that he was not the kind of man to suffer this kind of thing for any length of time without bearing and showing resentment, and I was curious to see what he would be moved to do.

His ill humour had so far found expression only in black looks and deprecatory scowls. But the gallant colonel was accustomed to more forcible methods, and the saving grace of patience, of which the abbé and Madame Mère were by instinct and by training rare examples, found no place in him. Like his brothers-in-arms his strong point was in forcing the fighting. He was a French soldier and so he could not wait, and, though I only learned this later, time pressed with him.

When Mademoiselle and I sought the terrace after breakfast next morning he joined us, with an assumption of good fellowship which sat so ill upon him that it did not deceive us for a moment.

He took up his position on the opposite side of Mademoiselle and paced up and down beside us, in a way that would have been annoying if it had not been so infinitely amusing.

But Mademoiselle did not see anything amusing in it. It was to her wholly annoying, and by the frostiness of her manner, which diverted and charmed me greatly, she made her sentiments so apparent that the

colonel could not fail to understand them. But he was troubled by no feelings of delicacy or diffidence himself, and he stuck to his post and talked to Mademoiselle till at last she bade us both good day and slipped away into the house.

I would dearly have liked to kick the colonel off the terrace for the unseemliness of his behaviour and for the deprivation I suffered in consequence, but that was not permissible, so I contented myself with walking away towards the woods, leaving him in possession of the field. As tactics, however, this move of the colonel's was a bad one and led to results the opposite of what he had hoped for.

I had my own views as to the course we might pursue under the circumstances, but I preferred waiting to see what line Mademoiselle would take, and she did exactly what I hoped she would do.

When we met before breakfast the next morning she said to me, 'I shall walk in the woods to-day. Will you meet me at the front door immediately after breakfast?'

Perhaps the grateful look I gave her showed her more than the simple expectation of the enjoyment of her company, for her sweet face flushed gloriously for a moment and she hastened to the table.

As we entered the woods a side glance showed us the colonel pacing the terrace in solitary expectancy, and for a moment our eyes met in laughing congratulations on our escape.

'It was just what I was hoping you would propose,' I said.

'But you left it to me.'

'Certainly. It was gracious in you, in me it might have been looked upon as an impertinence.'

'Oh, no, I could not have thought that. Anything is better than the colonel.' At which I laughed, and she, bethinking her of the reflection, laughed also.

'I did not mean that,' she said. 'It is a very great relief to my mind to have you here.'

'I am only sorry that I seem unable to make any advance in the other matter you have at heart.'

'Yes,' she sighed, 'it is weary work waiting for something to turn up, when you know he is eating out his heart in his prison. But I do not see what you can do but wait. Colonel Lepard never says anything bearing on the matter when he is talking with the abbé, does he?'

'Never. He and M. Dieufoy talk very little—before me at all events. I don't think the Church and the Army love one another over much.'

'That they don't, and besides their interests are opposed. But I begin to fear sometimes that you will tire of stopping on in this dull place, and that I am taxing your good nature over much by expecting it.'

'I would stop here for ever,' I began vehemently, provoked into an indiscretion by her words, 'if—' and then I feared to go too far.

'Ah, if—?'

'If—' I said, bringing myself up with a round turn, 'I could be of the very slightest service to Mademoiselle.'

We strolled through the woods, enjoying the novel immunity from observation, and extending our walk beyond our intentions.

Some three miles down the river stands the ruined mill which goes by the name of Bessancy, though the village of the same name is a good mile further on. In the pools by the broken weir lurk the heaviest fish of the river, and many a time had Vaurel and I harried them.

We sat for a time on the river bank, looking down the long sweeps of water with the trees drooping into them. Then we turned to go home, and then—this happened.

I was walking by the side of Mademoiselle when a

sudden slight sound behind caused me to glance backward, and then, quicker than it takes to tell, the wild figure of a man was leaping at us and striking blindly with a great rusty iron rod which he whirled with both hands.

I knew him at a glance, though he was an awful figure to look at—hair and beard and moustache all unkempt and awry, his clothes in tatters, his eyes burning like coals, no shoes on his feet—Roussel, as mad as a hatter, and bent on smashing us into pulp if he could manage it.

I stepped hastily back behind Mademoiselle, and cried,—

‘Run, Mademoiselle, run! I will tackle him!’

She hesitated, and then sped away, stumbling in her fright. Then the iron rod came down on my left arm, and it fell useless, but before he could hoist his weapon again I rushed in and caught him on his ragged chin with my fist. He staggered back and dropped the bar. As he recovered himself he glared wildly, and gnashed his teeth, and spat at me, and I thought he was coming on again. But instead, he suddenly tossed up his hands, all red with iron rust, and fled away down the river bank, and when I was sure he was gone for good I turned to follow Mademoiselle.

She was waiting at a distance and now came to meet me, and her face was very white and her eyes were suspiciously bright.

‘He is gone,’ I said, ‘the miserable brute. Thank God that iron bar did not reach you!’

‘Are you hurt?’ she asked, and her sweet voice trembled in spite of herself.

‘He got one blow in on my arm,’ I said, ‘but it can wait. Now we must get home. It gave you a fright. He’s mad, whoever he is.’

‘Didn’t you recognise him?’ she asked, with a catch in her breath.

‘Yes. It was Roussel. We thought he was dead.’

‘It is very terrible,’ she said.

‘Vaurel and the village people must hunt him down,’ I said. ‘It’s not safe for him to be at large in this state.’

‘It is very terrible,’ she said again.

‘Take my arm, Mademoiselle,’ I said, for she was all of a tremble still, ‘and let me help you along. No, the right arm, please,’ and so, in closer touch than we came, we went back home. The trustful, clinging contact of her hand on my arm sent my blood spinning, and I counted the delight of it cheaply bought at the price of my other arm which hung limply by my side.

Arrived at the château Mademoiselle sent off messengers hot foot for Prudent Vaurel and the village leech, and between them they bound up my arm and applied homely remedies for the reduction of the bruise. The bone did not seem to be broken, but all the same for the present it was useless.

That done, Vaurel set off to collect the villagers for the purpose of hunting down the madman, but they were not half so keen on seeking the live man as they had been on finding his dead body. They armed themselves with hasty weapons, billhooks and poles and an occasional rusty sword, and set off in a noisy group, bunched well together, with Juliot the *gendarme* in the van. They beat all the woods in the neighbourhood of the old mill, but, as might have been expected, without any results, and they came straggling back in the dusk somewhat crestfallen, maybe, at their want of success, but satisfied at all events at returning with whole skins.

And so the countryside was infested with a new terror, and Mademoiselle and I could take no more strolls in the further woods, and the villagers went about after nightfall with their chins on their shoulders, and cold creeps on the other side. But Prudent Vaurel spent much time by himself in the

woods, and for many days no wood-pigeons appeared on the table at the château.

The accident to my arm and the danger to which Mademoiselle had been exposed caused quite a little ripple of interest at the château.

Colonel Lepard was, I think, not ill-pleased, as was perhaps only natural in him, since it was in endeavouring to avoid his company that we had fallen into worse, or at all events more outwardly violent.

Monsieur Dieufoy was extremely sympathetic, and his shrewd eyes rather conveyed the idea that he considered I had scored in the matter.

Madame the Duchesse bore my wound with a meek resignation which suggested that it was a dispensation of Providence at which she was not in the least surprised, and that it was more than likely that I richly deserved all I had got.

But for myself I was well satisfied, for Mademoiselle was more than ever gracious and charming, and our sense of companionship, even in the presence of the others, was warmer and sweeter than ever.

CHAPTER XIII

DEVIL'S WORK

AFTER our encounter with Roussel, and pending definite news of his capture, it behoved Mademoiselle not to wander far afield. Our morning walk was therefore confined once more to the terrace, and as the terrace was free to all, and as Colonel Lepard made a point of being there at the same time as ourselves, we had perforce to put up with him as best we could.

On the second day, however, relief came unexpectedly from the outside. It was a dull, heavy day

with a threatening of thunder, and when we came out after breakfast we stood for a time looking at the strange aspect of the sky over the woods towards Bessancy, from behind which the clouds were boiling up like the black smoke from a steamer's funnel.

The colonel was on his beat already, and after a solitary stroll in which he passed and repassed us every second minute, he halted in front of us with some remark to Mademoiselle about the approaching storm, and then wheeled into line and joined us in our walk. But we had only paced the length of the terrace once when a stranger turned the corner from the front of the house and came along to meet us. He was in military uniform, and as he stood bowing and raising his *képi* to Mademoiselle, I recognised him as the dark-faced officer who had inquired the way to the château from Vaurel and myself that other day on the road near the village.

'Ah, it is you, my friend,' said Lepard in a tone the reverse of cordial.

'But yes, my colonel, it is I, myself. Won't you do me the honour of introducing me to your friends?'

It seemed to me that there was a suspicion of insolence or bravado in his voice and manner.

Lepard hesitated, and as I glanced at his face it was hard and black. Then he said,—

'But, certainly! Mademoiselle, this is Captain Zuyler of the Artillery, attached to the general staff, previously in Algiers. Monsieur Lamont—Captain Zuyler.'

'Monsieur is wounded?' asked the captain, glancing at my slung arm with a look of anticipation.

'Monsieur has a broken arm,' said Mademoiselle.

'Ah!—a duel?' asked the captain, with a hopeful snap of the eyes.

'No, an accident simply—in the woods,' whereupon the captain lost interest in me.

'If you will permit, Mademoiselle,' said Colonel

Lepard, 'we will walk in the park. Captain Zuyler no doubt comes on business,' and saluting us he linked his arm in the captain's and drew him reluctantly away in the direction of the woods.

'They will get wet, I'm afraid,' said Mademoiselle, as we stood looking after them.

'Their war-paint won't wash off,' I said. 'Does it strike you, Mademoiselle, that if one could convert oneself into a sprite and hide in the colonel's pocket one might learn many things from what passes between those two?'

She looked at me with a startled look in her eyes.

'You mean about Gaston? What makes you think that?'

I told her in a few words how these two had passed Vaurel and myself the other night near the station and of the impression their talk left on my mind.

She grew very thoughtful, and when at last the rain began to fall in heavy, spattering gouts like the dropping fire of an advance guard, she withdrew into the house and to her own room.

The storm came rolling up black as night over the woods, and the lightning flickered venomously among the tree tops, throwing them into ghastly, pallid relief that was almost continuous, so rapidly did the flashes follow one another.

I stood at the window watching, and as I watched I saw the figure of a man issue from the woods and come labouring along the path. Even at that distance I could see that it was the colonel, and that he was bare-headed and in evident distress of some kind or other.

In my surprise and desire for information I started out to meet him, forgetting for the moment that I was not supposed to speak French.

Fortunately M. Dieufoy had seen him also, and as I came out on to the terrace he issued from the window of another room and we ran together to meet the colonel.

‘Monsieur le Colonel, whatever has happened?’ cried M. Dieusoy, for as we drew near we saw that his head was bruised and bleeding, and his uniform stained and of course wet through, and he staggered blindly in his walk. His face was like chalk as he looked at us and raised his hands and dropped them to his side, as an intimation of the inexpressible.

‘*Mon Dieu!*’ he said hoarsely, ‘that devil of a madman stole upon us as we sheltered in the old mill. He struck down Zuyler with an iron beam and smashed his head in. I tried to grapple with him, but he got one blow in on me too, and then he turned and ran, and I could not follow, for the blow had turned me sick and dizzy.’

‘And your friend?’ said the abbé.

‘The poor Zuyler! he is dead,’ said the colonel, more hoarsely than before. ‘*Mon Dieu*, yes! his head went like an eggshell! He was dead when I lifted him.’

One on each side we assisted him into the house and up to his room, where I left the abbé to attend on his injuries, while I sent for Mademoiselle in order to get her to summon Vaurel and some of the villagers to seek Captain Zuyler or what was left of him, if he was really dead as the colonel said.

Mademoiselle came down at once, and her face was still aghast at my news when two men passed along the terrace in front of the window, and Mademoiselle exclaimed,—

‘There is Prudent now and Juliot with him. That is fortunate.’

She went out towards the front door, and the two men met us on the step. Vaurel looked savage with disgust. The *gendarme* was surly and obstinate.

‘Listen, Mademoiselle, this pig-headed Juliot wants to make out that I have murdered a man. And just simply because I found him lying there covered with blood and with the top of his head bashed in, and was trying to be of some assistance to him,’ cried Vaurel.

'The man is dead,' said Juliot, doggedly, 'and you were with him and there was no one else there. *Voilà!*'

'And did you see me kill him?' asked Vaurel, excitedly.

'No, because I was not there. If I had been there I should have seen.'

'Ass!' shouted Vaurel.

'That's as it may be,' said Juliot, composedly.

'Send for M. l'Abbé, Mademoiselle, if I may suggest it,' I said, and she ran at once herself to fetch him, while Hortense and her mother fluttered about helplessly in the rear.

M. Dieufoy came down at once with Mademoiselle, and in a few quiet words explained to Juliot that he was in the wrong, since Colonel Lepard had already explained how Captain Zuyler came by his death. Juliot sulkily agreed that that altered the complexion of affairs, and Vaurel exulted over his downfall, and assured him that he would not forget that he had believed him, Prudent Vaurel, capable of committing a murder.

The storm was growling and rumbling overhead all this while, and it had grown very dark, and when M. Dieufoy suggested the men going back to bring home the captain's body, it was not surprising, in the present state of feeling between them, that neither of them showed any inclination to do so.

Finally Mademoiselle prevailed on Vaurel to go up to the village to get assistance, and he returned with a dozen old men with torches. They could have found their way without the torches well enough, but these seemed to give them courage. Mademoiselle gave them each a glass of red wine, and they flickered away in an unsteady procession and the woods swallowed them up, and then after a couple of hours we saw them coming back, slowly and heavily, because they were old men and because of the burden they carried.

We sent the women folk away before they reached the house, and then had the body carried into a small unused room on the ground floor.

He was a very horrible sight, though the heavy rain had washed away some of the more repulsive traces of the tragedy. The blows must have been terrible ones—I could imagine only too well what they were like—for the top of the head was fairly beaten in.

‘God rest his soul!’ said the abbé, looking musingly down on the twisted face, ‘but—’ and he left his reservation incomplete.

‘Did you know him, Monsieur l’Abbé?’ I was tempted to ask in English.

‘I knew him,’ he said. ‘He was not good. Still, “*de mortuis*”—you know. We will speak of him no more.’

We left Vaurel and one of the villagers to arrange him, and as we quitted the room I inquired of the abbé how Colonel Lepard was faring.

‘He is very sick,’ he said, ‘but his wound is but a slight one. It was much of a shock to him to have his friend beaten down before his eyes like that.’

We saw nothing of the colonel during the next day. M. Dieufoy himself sent to Rennes for an undertaker and communicated the details of the affair to the authorities, and on the following day the colonel got heavily into the family carriage and followed the creaking cart which carried his friend to the station, and then went on with the body to Paris, and it seemed to me that we were in for a quiet time at the château and that my mission was at a standstill.

CHAPTER XIV

WHAT VAUREL SAW

THE murder of Captain Zuyler, and the thought of the madman still at large, had a depressing influence on us all, and the people of the village would not stir out of doors after nightfall upon any consideration whatever. I wished much that Mademoiselle could be got away, for the events of the last few days began to tell on her, and yet her society was so very sweet to me that I was loth to suggest any change which must inevitably remove her from such protection as I could offer. But my ideas were suddenly crystallised into action.

I was loitering solitarily on the terrace, on the afternoon of the day on which Colonel Lepard left, when Vaurel came along with the rods and intimated that it was a good day for the fishing.

I saw by his face that he had something to say to me, and we set off up the river, past his house, in the direction of Bency, for Juliot and a party of *gendarmes* from Rennes were ransacking the woods in the other direction in vain search for Roussel.

Vaurel spoke little till we came to his own house. Boulot was inside, but he knew his master's step and only snuffled at us under the door, and when Vaurel pulled the key out of his pocket and opened it he reared himself up against me and gave me a hearty welcome.

I stopped in surprise at seeing my old bed occupied, and was more surprised still when I saw that it was Roussel lying there, worn and wasted, and whether dead or asleep I could not tell.

I looked at Vaurel and asked, 'What is the meaning of this?'

'I found him like that in the wood the morning after the storm, and carried him here,' he said.

'Is he alive?'

'Just alive, monsieur, no more.'

'I'm not sure but it would have been a greater kindness to let him die.'

'Possibly, but, *mon Dieu*, monsieur, I could not leave him lying there.'

'If he recovers his life is forfeit.'

'That is as it may be, but not for the death of Captain Zuyler.'

I shook my head. 'I don't understand, my friend. Colonel Lepard saw it.'

'Ah! and I was there too, and saw a great deal more than Monsieur le Colonel has any idea of. If he had he would blow those rascally brains of his out. But I want something from him before he goes, and that is why I said nothing.'

'Speak plainly, Vaurel. What the devil are you driving at? We are not playing at riddles.'

'*Bien!* Here it is then, monsieur. It was Colonel Lepard himself who killed his friend, not this poor miserable at all!'

I stared at him in amazement, doubting at once my ears and his senses.

'It was so,' he repeated.

'But Colonel Lepard was wounded himself.'

'Yes—by himself. I saw it all, and it seems to me, monsieur, that if we work this matter right we may find the key to unlock Monsieur Gaston's prison and set him free and restore him whole to Mademoiselle, unless, *mon Dieu*, he dies in the meantime.'

'Tell me all you know, Vaurel.'

'I had been searching for days past for him, as you know,' nodding towards the bed. 'It seemed to me likely that he used the old mill as a retreat, and so

that he should not see me I climbed a tree from which I could keep watch on the mill. That afternoon of the storm Colonel Lepard and the captain came along the path. The rain was just coming on and they stopped for shelter under the tree I was in. There was hot dispute going on between them, and this is what they said, as nearly as I can remember it. The captain broke out: "I tell you I will wait no longer. I have waited, waited, waited, till my credit is broken. I must have money and at once."

'And the colonel said sulkily, "Well, I haven't got any."

"Then," said the other, "I have made up my mind to sell my wares elsewhere."

"What do you mean by that?" asked the colonel, angrily.

"Just exactly what I say, my friend," said the captain. "There is a market to my hand here, and the payment will be liberal."

"You mean Mademoiselle?" said the Colonel

"Of course," said the captain, "who else should I mean? Mademoiselle would give half her fortune to learn some things I could tell her."

"Zuyler, you are a dirty scoundrel," said the colonel.

"There is not much to choose between us, my colonel," said the captain.

'Then the thunder came on, and the lightning began to play among the trees, and I was not very happy, and those below didn't like it either, and Colonel Lepard ran through the rain to the old mill, and the other followed.

'When the storm cleared for a bit I saw them looking out of the doorway, and then of a sudden the captain went down like a struck ox, and it was Colonel Lepard who struck him from behind with an iron bar, and struck him again and again as he lay on the ground. He stood looking at him for a time and then

he threw down his *képi* and swung the bar between his legs and brought it down on his own bare head, and swore horribly at the pain he gave himself. Then he dabbed some of the other's blood over his own head and face, and then he started off home. It all paralysed me, and when I came down at last and went to see if any life was left in the captain, Juliot came along from Bessancy way and found me and thought I'd done it. Perhaps he had reason. But it all happened just as I have told you, monsieur.'

'It's a terrible story, Vaurel.'

'And every word of it is true, monsieur. And now,' he said, 'we have Colonel Lepard in the hollow of our hands, and if we can't wring the truth out of him about young Gaston, we're a pair of fools.'

'I believe every word you have told me, Vaurel, but you'll never get the world to believe it.'

'But I saw it all with my own two eyes, monsieur.'

'You would have to convince other people of that, or, at all events, if you want to screw anything out of Lepard, you would have to convince him that you are able to convince other people.'

'*Bien!* I will condemn him out of his own mouth.'

'How then?'

'He told you it was Roussel who attacked them.'

'He did. Monsieur Dieufoy was there at the time.'

'He never said it was me, for instance?'

'He mentioned no one but Roussel.'

'And he did not give you any impression that he could have been mistaken?'

'He simply stated that it was the madman who attacked them with an iron rod, just as he had attacked Mademoiselle and myself a few days before.'

'Exactly! it was that put him up to it. Well, monsieur, here is my proof of his lying, and if a man lies in such a case it is for an object. Old Père Goliot had to fetch a parcel from the station for the farm on that day, and he and Louis-Yard walked up together

in the rain. Just after they had crossed the bridge he '—nodding at Roussel on the bed—' broke out from the bushes and crossed the road and went down towards the river. They were for going after him, but they heard the train coming up and they hurried to the station. You know what time the train from Redon arrives. It was therefore exactly three o'clock. And a few minutes later Colonel Lepard says this same Roussel attacked him and the captain at the old mill of Bessancy, which is four miles away. *Voilà!*

I nodded. 'That works out all right. But have Louis Vard and old Goliot said nothing of all this to anyone else?'

'I went up to Mère Thibaud's last night to wash the taste of that poor devil of a captain out of my mouth. Père Goliot was there, and they were all talking of the murder and chaffing the old man because he said he had seen the madman up near the station that same afternoon, when by rights he must have been down at the old mill murdering people. The old chap went sulky and would say nothing but "Very well, very well, ask Louis Vard." I knew if Louis Vard had seen him it was just the card I wanted, and I had a drink and slipped out quietly to meet him as he came from the station. I asked him if it was true he and Père Goliot had seen Roussel at three o'clock, and he said it was, and then I asked him to keep it to himself till I wanted him to tell it, and told him as shortly as I could why I wanted it, and he understood and promised, and then he went in and I followed him soon after and greeted him as if we had not seen one another. Poor old Goliot was weeping with his head on the table. He had appealed to Louis as soon as he came in, and Louis only laughed at him and said he must have had too much cider, and the old fellow couldn't stand it and cried like a baby. It couldn't be helped, and when the rest had gone I tackled him while Louis was busy with Jeanne. He stuck to his story and I wrote it all down

in my pocket-book where I mark down my pigeons and my fish, and asked him to sign it, which he did, saying, "And it's true, Monsieur Vaurel, every word of it." I told him if he took my advice he would say no more about it to anyone, or he might get into trouble, and then I gave him five francs and he went home quite happy. Louis Vard wrote out his statement on the next page. Here it is and here is Père Goliot's. That little book, monsieur, holds enough to drop Monsieur Lepard's ugly head into the basket. Is it not so?'

'I believe it is, Vaurel, and it was cleverly done on your part. Now, how do you suggest making use of it?'

'Ah, there I don't see my way so clearly. That is what I want to talk to you about. You can guess why Colonel Lepard has gone to Paris?'

'To bury his—friend and explain matters, I suppose.'

'And to secure his papers without doubt. Now the first thing is to get Monsieur le Colonel back here without a moment's delay, and the next is to get Mademoiselle away before he comes.'

'Why?'

'We may have strange doings when the colonel comes, monsieur, and Mademoiselle will be better out of them. If we once get hold of him we shall not let him go until he tells all he knows.'

There seemed to me possibilities in the scheme, though Lepard did not strike me as a particularly likely subject for coercion. Still there was no knowing. Men of that mould sometimes go to pieces more readily than quieter and less blustering ones. Anyhow, if the scheme offered the slightest prospect of success it was worth trying.

'And where can Mademoiselle go to?'

'I have thought out the beginning of it all,' said Vaurel. 'My idea is that she might pretend to fall in with Madame Mère's ideas and return with her to Combourg.'

‘To a convent?’

‘To the Convent of the Sacred Heart, of which madame is the superior.’

Vaurel smiled at the blankness of my look, and added,—

‘Mademoiselle would not take the veil right away, and if the time came when she desired to leave the convent, well, there are ways.’

‘She would be entirely under their influence,’ I said doubtfully. ‘They might persuade her—’

‘No,’ he said, shaking his big head knowingly, ‘I think not, monsieur. Not now. Before—yes, perhaps, but not now. I am sure not, unless—’

‘Unless what?’

But for answer he only shrugged his shoulders and smiled meaningly.

‘You need not fear for Mademoiselle, monsieur. She will be quite safe there, and your mind will be at ease on her account.’

‘Perhaps she won’t go,’ I said, half hoping in truth that it might be so.

‘If monsieur will explain the idea to her, Mademoiselle will not hesitate to do anything for the sake of Monsieur Gaston.’

‘And how do you expect to open Colonel Lepard’s mouth?’

‘Let us get him here,’ said he, ‘and we will do our best, and the sooner we get him here the better.’

We sat and planned and replanned, and wiped it all out and planned again, till it was quite dark, and all that time the sick man lay, without sign of life except an almost imperceptible movement of the chest with his faint breathing, and in stark silence except for an occasional quiet sigh of utter weariness, and a babbled word or two which had no meaning for us.

When at length we had got our ideas into definite shape, I returned to the château and begged Hortense to obtain me an interview with Mademoiselle

as soon as possible. She returned immediately and asked me to follow her, and led me to the door of Mademoiselle's own room.

It was a charming little nest, hung with faded rose silk. A fire of split oak logs burned on the hearth, and Mademoiselle had been sitting before it in a big cushioned chair, for a couple of candles with pink shades stood on a small table beside the book she had just laid down.

She met me with eager questioning in her face.

'You have news for me?' she asked.

'I have very grave news and a great many plans,' I said, and I laid the whole matter before her, just as Vaurel and I had discussed it, and told her what we wanted to do. She listened with keen attention, nodding her pretty head now and again to hurry me on, and seeing the end of a sentence before I had barely started it. She was shocked and horrified at the information about Captain Zuyler's murder, but did not question it.

'I would take Prudent Vaurel's word for anything,' she said; 'he has always been an honest man.'

She did not take over kindly to the convent idea, which somehow gave me pleasure, but she had no better suggestion to offer.

'Madame Mère will be very unwilling to ever let me go if once she has me at Combourg,' she said, shaking her head doubtfully. 'She is made of marble, and has no more heart than a statue. Why can I not stop here?'

'We cannot tell yet what may happen. We are willing to take the risks ourselves, but we don't want any possible consequences of anything we may do to fall upon you.'

'I would sooner stop and share the consequences,' she said, and added hastily, 'I would do more than that for Gaston.'

'We know that, Mademoiselle, but we would not

feel so free to act as we may have to act if you were here.'

'Then of course I must go,' she said. 'You speak as if you were going to torture the colonel.'

'I hope the colonel's common sense won't drive us to that,' I said; 'but if we get him here it is to make him speak, and if he won't speak he will have to be made to.'

She sat looking musingly into the fire.

'And as to the convent,' I said, 'I do not know much about convents, but, according to Vaurel, you will have no difficulty in getting away when you want to. But perhaps you will find the life so pleasant and restful that you won't want to quit it.'

'Perhaps I shall,' she said quietly, and it seemed to me that the rosy light on the fair round cheek grew just a trifle rosier.

'Will you promise me one thing,' she asked presently.

'I will promise you anything,' I said, perhaps a trifle too heartily, for the rosy light in her cheek deepened again.

'Bring me word—or let me know, as soon as you have any news. I shall be very lonely and very anxious.'

'That I would do in any case,' I said, 'and I hope to be the bearer of good news, for we have the colonel in a cleft stick and we won't let him out till he tells us all he knows.'

She nodded. 'How are you going to get him here? You have not told me that yet.'

'I want to send him a telegram in your name, Mademoiselle, something like this—"Return immediately—or please come quickly—I am in danger."'

She pursed her lips and wrinkled her brow and thought it over. The idea was evidently distasteful to her.

Then she got a piece of paper and a pencil, and

tried the message in various forms, but, judging from her face, she liked the look of none of them. At last, however, she handed me the message in its final shape—'Come quickly. I want your assistance.'

'Will that do?' she asked.

'That will bring him as fast as he can come,' I said; 'but you must add your name.'

'In full?'

'No, simply Denise.'

'That will make talk here,' she said.

'No. Vaurel will go up to Rennes by the last train and send it from there. Now, when can you be ready to leave here, Mademoiselle? The colonel will be back to-morrow night most likely. Perhaps you will also arrange for Hortense and her mother to go home. We shall want the place to ourselves.'

'Then we must go in the afternoon. I will tell Madame Mère at once and prepare her, and I will arrange about Hortense and her mother. Perhaps you will give some explanation to Monsieur Dieufoy. What will you say?'

'I shall tell him I do not think it wise for you to stay here in view of the things that have happened lately, and ask him if he thinks Madame de St Ouen would take charge of you for a time, and I shall urge your going at once.'

'They will jump at the prospect,' she said, 'but I shall be sorry to go. I am very fond of the old house. Gaston and I spent most of our childhood here.'

'You will return under happier circumstances, and, I hope, with Monsieur Gaston,' I said. 'Now I will go and talk to Monsieur l'Abbé.'

I found Hortense and sent her to ask M. Dieufoy if I could speak with him, and he came down immediately to the salon.

'Monsieur l'Abbé,' I said in English, 'I have just come from Mademoiselle. I have been urging her to leave this place at once. I do not think it right she

should remain here under present circumstances. Am I not right?'

He took a pinch of snuff and gazed at me with his head on one side in his inquisitive, bird-like way. He took another pinch of snuff while he arranged his answer in English, and then said, 'I think that is a very wise decision, Monsieur Lamont. What does Mademoiselle say?'

'She does not wish to go, but I think I have succeeded in persuading her to it.'

'And where does Mademoiselle wish to go?' he asked cautiously.

'Well, I thought perhaps it could be arranged that Madame de St Ouen should take charge of her for a time. Do you think she would be willing to do so?'

'She might,' he said, and took another very deliberate pinch, marvelling much, I could see, at the way Providence was playing into his hands. 'I will speak to madame on the subject. When would Mademoiselle think of going?'

'The sooner the better, Monsieur l'Abbé. Candidly,' I said, dropping into a confidential tone, 'I do not consider it safe here with that madman wandering about. There is no knowing what might happen next.'

He nodded. 'I quite agree with you, monsieur. It gives one a feeling of discomfort when he may jump out on you from every bush and any corner. Mademoiselle will be better away, and, *ma foi!* for myself I shall not be sorry to go also.'

What M. Dieufoy thought my real motives were I cannot say. His face was ever a closed book, though not so tightly sealed as madame's, but I do not think he believed them to be so transparently simple as they seemed. More than once during dinner I felt his eyes fixed inquiringly upon me, as though he would like to look inside and get at actual facts.

As soon as dinner was over I excused myself and

slipped off quietly to Vaurel's house, where he was expecting me, and a few minutes later he was on his way to the station, while I remained with Boulot in charge of Roussel.

That was a weary vigil, for Master Boulot jumped heavily on to his master's bed the moment his master's back was turned, and curled himself round and went to sleep, leaving me to watch by the sick man or to follow his example as I chose.

However, the night passed, between dozing and waking, and ministering as well as I was able to the necessities of Roussel, and marvelling somewhat at the strange broad streak in Vaurel's nature which had led him to assume the burden of this flickering life.

Vaurel returned by the early morning train, we discussed some further details of our plans, and then I went back to the château, where preparations for departure were being hurriedly completed.

When we met at breakfast, which partook somewhat of the nature of a pilgrims' feast, for we were all in our travelling things and had not much time to spare, M. Dieufoy asked me pointedly as to my own plans, and I told him that I travelled with them as far as Rennes, where I might stay for a short time, and after that I had made no arrangements.

Our journey to Rennes gave me no opportunity for further conversation with Mademoiselle, who sat looking out of the window much as I had seen her that first day we met. There we parted, for M. Dieufoy was to accompany the ladies to Combourg.

There was, or so it seemed to me, a look of wistful regret in Mademoiselle's eyes as she raised them to mine in saying good-bye, and she said, 'You will not forget to let me know?'

'I shall forget nothing, Mademoiselle,' I said and—well, perhaps my eyes said more than my words, for once more it seemed to me that something in her glance responded to the feeling that was in me.

Madame de St Ouen bade me farewell with a bow of impassive frigidity, but though her face was, as it always was, like that of a marble statue, it conveyed to me, in some occult fashion, a sense of exultation on her part, and I looked at her again to see where it showed, and could not discover it, though the feeling remained with me.

M. Dieufoy, on the other hand, shook me heartily by the hand, and said how much he had enjoyed my society, and hoped we might meet again at some future time.

I was permitted, by virtue of the presence of madame and M. l'Abbé, to see the travellers into the St Malo train, and then I took the next train back to Cour-des-Comptes, wondering much what that night and the next few days might have in store for us all.

I took the roundabout path to Vaurel's cottage and so avoided the village. It was almost dusk when I arrived there, and he was expecting me. The keys of the château had been left with him by Hortense, acting on Mademoiselle's instructions, and he proposed that we should go there at once, taking Roussel with us. I had been so busy thinking of other matters that I had overlooked the fact that the sick man would still need our attention, but there was evidently nothing else to be done with him, and Vaurel had already rigged up a transport hammock by means of a blanket and a long pole.

We carefully put out the fire, which, Vaurel casually remarked, had been alive for over a year, and then, settling Roussel into the hammock, we put the ends of the pole on our shoulders, locked the door, and with Boulot paddling along in front, started out through the shadows for the château.

CHAPTER XV

HOW WE TRAPPED THE TRAITOR

WE had still three hours before Colonel Lepard could arrive. There was, of course, the possibility that he had been unable to leave at once, and might not come till the following day, but we believed he would come that night, and made all our preparations accordingly.

We made Roussel comfortable in a bedroom upstairs, and then made a hearty meal ourselves in the salon below, and sat smoking while we waited the arrival of our—guest.

In this state of expectancy the minutes which lay between us and the supreme moment when our plans would be put to the test, for the making and marring of more than one life, passed but slowly. As the time drew near, my heart began to thump a trifle quicker, and every nerve in my body seemed on the alert for the first sound that should tell us that the time had come.

Vaurel smoked calmly, but I have no doubt he felt much the same.

‘It’s time he was here,’ I said at last, for the simple pleasure of breaking the oppressive silence.

Vaurel grunted.

‘If he’s coming,’ I said.

‘He’ll come,’ said Vaurel through his pipe-stem.

And then there came a sudden peremptory rat-tat on the great hall door, which brought us both to our feet and the blood to our heads for a moment.

‘*Le voilà!*’ said Vaurel. ‘I will let him in. You have your revolver, Monsieur Lamont?’

I nodded.

'Then now the play begins,' and he went out into the hall.

I heard his 'Ah, Monsieur le Colonel, it is you! Pray give yourself the trouble to enter—' The colonel, I could hear, had not awaited the invitation, but was already in the hall.

'You are expected in the salon, Monsieur le Colonel,' said Vaurel, suavely, and I heard him bolting the front door, and then the firm, ringing step came across the flags to the room where I was standing with my back to the fire.

'*Tiens!* it is you, Monsieur Lamont?' said the colonel, as he pushed aside the draught curtain that hung over the door.

He halted for a moment on the threshold in evident surprise. Then he came forward, tossed his *képi* on to the table and threw off his military coat. I heard the door close behind him and knew that Vaurel stood waiting inside.

'Yes, it is I, Monsieur le Colonel,' I replied in French, and his eyes gave a blink of surprise, and then settled into a look of suspicion.

'Won't you sit down?' I said. 'I have something to say to you, and some questions to ask on behalf of Mademoiselle des Comptes.'

He frowned and sat down. The reception was not what he had expected. He did not quite know what to make of it.

'Well, monsieur, and what are your questions?' he asked gruffly.

'In the first place, Mademoiselle begs you to give her all the information you can in connection with the affair of her brother Gaston.'

The dark face grew black. 'I have no information to give to Mademoiselle,' he said curtly.

'I know differently, Colonel Lepard, and I intend to have that information.'

'How, monsieur? You—intend—! What talk is this?'

'Listen, Colonel Lepard,' I said quietly. 'Madoiselle left here this morning with Madame de St Ouen and Monsieur Dieufoy, by my request. You are alone here with myself and Prudent Vaurel, and you don't leave this house until you have disclosed the whole matter.'

'Ten thousand devils!' he shouted, springing up and blazing out like a live shell. 'Am I crazy, or are you?'

I said nothing and only continued to eye him steadily.

'The contract is too big for you, Monsieur—Lamont, if that be your name. If you think you can squeeze me you are very much mistaken.'

I bowed, but held my peace, which only made him the more angry.

'See here,' he said roughly, 'if you or your poacher friend attempt to lay a finger on me, I'll simply blow holes in you.'

He slipped his hand inside his tunic, but my hand had only to come out of my jacket pocket and I was first.

'Drop that instantly!' I said, 'or I fire.'

He was a very great scoundrel, but he was no coward. He probably felt that I had more to gain from him alive than dead, whereas he had everything to gain by killing me, and absolutely nothing to lose. He had been trapped into the house, he was being subject to menace, the law would certainly hold him guiltless.

If he thought these things they passed through his brain like a flash, for his revolver spoke instantly. The flash almost blinded me and the bullet grazed my head.

The next moment Vaurel had flung round his arms a noose with a running knot and drawn it tight, and so held him powerless.

I thought he would have had a fit. All the blood in his body seemed to rush into his head and neck till he seemed like to burst, and he fairly foamed curses.

'Gently!' said Vaurel, giving him a shake. 'Your master the devil has handed you over to our care, Monsieur le Colonel, to purge some of the evil out of you. Take my advice and don't throw away any chance that is given you.'

Vaurel jerked him down into a chair in spite of his struggles, and twisted the rest of the rope round and round him till he could not move a limb.

'Now,' said Vaurel, as he straightened himself from his task, 'that's what I call a neat job.'

He cursed us with every foul oath he could lay his tongue to, and with all the passion of impotence, and we had to wait till his breath gave out to get a chance of speaking.

'Now, listen,' I said, when he was fairly spent, 'and you can think over it during the night. If you put us in the way of proving Gaston des Comptes's innocence, you go free. If you refuse we hand you over to justice for the murder of your accomplice Captain Zuyler—' and at that he was suddenly silent and the red passion in his face gave way to a black pallor.

'We know all about it,' I said. 'The proofs are complete, and the motive is patent. It is your life for Gaston's. Think it out, Monsieur le Colonel. I will see you in the morning.'

Vaurel tilted the chair back on to its hind legs and dragged it scraping and groaning along the hallway to a small pantry at the back of the house, the window of which was very small and very high up—the room where Zuyler's body had lain three days before—and not one single word did the prisoner speak during this undignified progress.

He was as silent as a sack of flour, as Vaurel said. His mind seemed to have struck ground on the fact

that we knew all about the murder of Captain Zuyler, and had not yet had time to get afloat again.

And so the first step in our search for information was successfully accomplished. How far ahead the last one might be we could none of us foresee. We could only take things as they came, and at all events it was much to have Lepard in our hands, and to have brought him face to face with our demands, and with the knowledge that his own personal safety lay in complying with them. We had dug the mine and laid the train, and our prisoner was tied to the powder barrel and was aware of it. The opening of his mouth in the way we wanted it would set him free, and the next day or two would show which way he elected to travel. All we could do was to await the result of his meditations.

'We ought to have given him something to eat and drink, Vaurel,' I said.

'Not at all, not at all; a day or two's fasting would do him no harm. He is much too fat, and meagre faring tends to high thinking, you know, monsieur.'

'Still, we must keep him alive. He is no use to us dead.'

'He won't die to-night, anyway, and he's got plenty to think about. I'm going up to see how the other one's getting on. Do you think he has any chance of pulling through, monsieur?'

'While there's life there's hope, you know. But he seemed to me very far gone last night, and candidly, *mon ami*, unless you can coax back his brain too, I rather doubt the advantage of his coming back at all.'

'That might come,' said Vaurel, 'but anyhow I can't help feeling sorry for him,' and he went upstairs to attend to his patient.

But he was down again almost instantly with another idea which had not occurred to either of us.

'Monsieur Lamont,' he said, 'it would be as well

for Colonel Lepard to return to Rennes to-night by the late train.'

'What the deuce do you mean, Vaurel?' I gasped, wondering for a moment whether something had slipped in his brain also.

'Don't you see?' he said, with his eyes dancing. 'The folks in the village and at the station saw him arrive. If they don't see him go away they will suppose him still here, and if he is pigheaded and unreasonable we may have to keep him some time, in which case we don't want them to think that!'

'Well?'

'Well, they must see him go away again to-night, and then they will be satisfied and won't talk. One of us must go back dressed in the colonel's coat and *képi*. It must be me, I think. You're too slim. I'm more of his shape, though, thank God, it's not simple fat. I'll get to the station just as the train is in, and with the hood drawn over my head, and them all half asleep, they'll never notice. Then I'll get out at Bency as Prudent Vaurel, in my own cap and blouse, with the colonel's things in a parcel, and I'll get back here by the road by two o'clock.'

'You think we may have to hold him some time?'

'Longer than we expected maybe, monsieur. You see he knows as well as we do that if we give him up that won't help us one bit in M. Gaston's affair, and he will make the most of that. I'm thinking too it will help us to let him starve for a bit. There's nothing takes down the spunk in a man like that quicker than an empty stomach.'

'You'll take a look now and again at that one upstairs,' he said, as he got into Colonel Lepard's big coat and put the gold-braided *képi* on his head. 'Mon Dieu! don't I look fine? I always thought I would make a better officer than most of them, and—*me voilà!*—M. le Colonel Vaurel of the General Staff!'

He turned and twisted in front of the glass, as pleased as a child with his new suit, and when he drew the hood of the coat over his head, and tucked his beard inside the collar, it seemed likely enough that in the dark, and on the jump, he would pass well enough for the colonel.

'*Bien! au revoir, monsieur!*' he saluted me in the most approved style of haughty nonchalance, and I let him out at the front door and bolted it after him.

Then I took a candle and went upstairs to take a look at Roussel, with Boulot padding inquisitively after me wherever I went. And then I sought out Mademoiselle's pink nest, where I had talked with her the night before, and I lighted the fire and sat me down in her own soft chair, and let my thoughts dwell lovingly on the charming mistress of the mansion and of my heart.

I tried to picture her as last I saw her sitting here, rosy pink in the light of the shaded candles. I tried to recall her wistful look at the station at Rennes as she bade me not to forget. But, strangely enough, while all her surroundings were limned in my memory as clearly as photographs, Mademoiselle's own sweet face, as last I saw it, constantly eluded me. If I got it for a moment, the next moment it was gone. Madame de St Ouen's marble mask and downcast eyes, and M. Dieufoy's pointed nose and sharply-cut chin, these danced mockingly in between me and the clear vision of Mademoiselle, and at last I got up and went to my own room and got out the rolled-up portrait of 'Mdle. X.,' and pinned it to the hangings of the boudoir, and sat before it worshipfully, wondering much how it fared with Mademoiselle herself, and daring even to wonder whether her sweet heart turned towards me as my heart turned towards her. But for her own peace of mind I was fain to hope that if she thought of me at all, her thoughts might be less strenuous than my own, for the longing I had for the

sight of her, and the sound of her, and the feeling of her presence close at hand, came very near to actual physical pain. My whole heart yearned for this loveliest of women, and here was I cooped up with a madman, and a murderer, and a brindled bull-dog, and the bull-dog was more to my liking than either of the others.

CHAPTER XVI

TANGLES

It was just about two in the morning when Vaurel's knock sounded on the door, and I was glad to see his honest face again, for there was something depressing in the feeling of being shut up in the big house with those other two, even though they were both quite harmless.

'That's all right,' he said, as he dropped into a chair. 'Colonel Lepard returned to Paris by the last train last night, and old Monsieur Leflo at the station will not forget it in a hurry. *Mon Dieu!* how the colonel did swear at him for not keeping the train waiting a minute longer, although the old gentleman could not possibly have known he was coming. He came very near to missing it, and jumped in when it was on the move, and then put out his head and swore at Monsieur Leflo till the old grey-beard fairly shook with anger,' and he laughed heartily at the recollection of his exploit, for M. Leflo, the *chef-de-gare* was lofty in his manners and somewhat overbearing towards his inferiors, and Vaurel had evidently greatly enjoyed getting even with him for once.

In the morning we paid a visit to our prisoner,

Boulot peering between our legs and snuffling and growling uneasily at sight of him.

He certainly was a sufficiently unpleasing object. He looked limp, and shrunk, and broken down, but a trace of the last night's spirit rose in him as the door opened, and his face was set in a grim scowl which showed no present sign of giving in to our demands.

'Are you prepared now to give us the information we wish, Monsieur Lepard?' I asked.

But not a word would he say, though I could see, by the clench of his jaw and the throbbing pulse in his temple, that he was bursting with wrath and kept it in with difficulty.

'When you tell us all we want to know, and we have had time to test the truth of it, you shall go free,' I said; 'until then you stop here.'

No answer came, and we turned the key on him and left him to his thoughts.

'We must feed him, Vaurel,' I said.

'Not yet, monsieur, not yet, I beg of you. It seems cruel to starve him, but he will take no real harm, and remember, it is better lives than his we are working for.'

And so we left him all that day, but the thought of him feeding on nothing but his own black thoughts took away my own appetite, and I could eat nothing.

By the evening he was in a state of physical collapse, and could scarce hold up his head to scowl at us. I could not stand the sight of it any longer and bade Vaurel unfasten him, which he did with much reluctance. I think he would have liked to subject him to treatment for one more night, but I feared the result and insisted on his being freed from his bonds. I mixed him some wine and water and placed a loaf within his reach, but he made no signs of desiring them while we were there.

We ostentatiously tied Boulot with a stout cord to the door handle outside, and as we went down the hall

we heard him blow a warning snuffle below the door, which deepened into a snarling roar, as he tore at the crack with his great front paws and seemed to be giving back curse for curse with the man inside.

'He's not going to speak, Vaurel,' I said.

'He'll tire in time, and we can wait more comfortably than he can,' said Vaurel confidently.

The days passed, however, and the prisoner remained as dumb to us as though he had never spoken in this world. Much as I detested him and the things he had done, I could not but marvel at, and in a certain way admire, the steadfastness of purpose which bottled up even that fount of profanity, the letting loose of which would have given such immense relief.

Day followed day, every night and every morning we gave him the chance of speaking, but never one word did he let drop in our hearing. We suspected indeed that he let loose his evil tongue on Boulot, for every now and again the grim old fellow broke out suddenly into a wild fury of snarls and yelps and tore at the bottom of the door as though he would have it down, but when we tiptoed cautiously to listen all was silent within and we could make nothing of it.

Vaurel was greatly surprised at the way he held out.

'I thought he was flabbier,' he said. 'He's a man after all. Pity he's a bad one.'

'How is it all going to end?' I asked, with no little disturbance of mind, on the seventh night of the colonel's imprisonment, for it looked as though we might go on this way for ever.

'God knows,' said Vaurel, 'but we've got him and we'll stick to him.'

Our other patient meanwhile was mending. He was weak and worn with his exposure, and he had a hacking cough, but he seemed coming to his right mind, and was picking up strength every day. Vaurel tended him with a solicitude that surprised me and won my appreciation. And Roussel was grateful for all we

did for him, and apparently remembered nothing of what had happened just before his illness, or, if he remembered at all, it was only as one recalls with a shudder the broken bits of a nightmare.

But our plans were threatened suddenly by two outside dangers, one of which we had taken no account of, because we had not reckoned on Lepard's holding out so long, and the other of which it had been impossible to foresee, because no human being can forecast the eccentricities of an unbalanced brain.

One day an unusual rap came at the front door, and Vaurel opening it was confronted by an officer in the uniform of a captain of Chasseurs.

'Is Monsieur le Colonel Lepard stopping here?' he asked.

'No, monsieur,' said Vaurel, and I could well imagine the look of vacant surprise he would put on.

'But he has been here?'

'Yes, monsieur, Monsieur le Colonel came one night about a week ago—'

'Thursday of last week,' interjected the officer.

'That was it—exactly! Thursday of last week. I remember it was Thursday because that was the day Mademoiselle left.'

'Ah!' said the officer, 'Mademoiselle left on Thursday, did she? And where has Mademoiselle gone to?'

'To Combourg, monsieur, with Madame the Duchesse de St Ouen and Monsieur l'Abbé Dieufoy.'

'And Colonel Lepard came here after they had left?'

'The very same night, monsieur, and they left by the mid-day train.'

'And the colonel?'

'Naturally, when he heard Mademoiselle was gone he went also. He returned, I understood, by the night train.'

Here Boulot and the colonel had one of their little wrangles, and the hall resounded with snarls and yelps.

'*Mon Dieu!* what is all that?' asked the captain.

'My bull-dog after a rat,' said Vaurel. 'Has monsieur made inquiries at the station?'

'Yes, they tell me the same thing. But I was bound to ask here also. I thank you, my friend. Good day!'

'Good day, Monsieur le Capitaine, and I hope you will find Monsieur le Colonel all right. He is a brave man!' and with great enjoyment Vaurel watched the captain return the way he had come.

But it was evident that the colonel's disappearance was beginning to excite suspicion at headquarters, and this set us to the discussion of further plans for his safe keeping and the attainment of our end.

But before we were able to arrive at any decision in the matter our anxieties were suddenly piled into heaps in other direction.

The morning after the visit of the emissary from headquarters Vaurel came bounding into my room, before I was up, in a state of great agitation.

'He is gone, monsieur,' he cried.

'Gone? Who? the colonel?' and I jumped up and began dressing in haste.

'No, the other, the madman.'

'But how gone, Vaurel? and where to?'

'I left him sleeping quietly when I turned in,' he said. 'Now his window is open and he is gone. He is off his head again, I expect, and has made for the woods.'

'Has he taken his clothes with him?'

'I did not look. I saw he was no longer there, and came to tell you at once.'

We went into Roussel's room and a moment's examination showed us that he had simply got out of bed, opened the window, and scrambled down in some inexplicable way, and it was evident that he had gone with no more clothing than his nightshirt.

'I'm afraid all your care is wasted, my friend,' I said. 'His brain has evidently slipped again, just as we thought he was getting better.'

'We must get help from the village and try and find him again,' said Vaurel.

But all the difficulties of the position suddenly flashed upon me.

'No, that won't do,' I said. 'What will they do if they catch him?'

'*Mon Dieu!* I never thought of that.'

'They think he murdered Captain Zuyler, and if they catch him they will hand him over to justice, and we could only set matters right by handing over the colonel and telling all we know, and then good-bye to all our hopes.'

'That is so,' said Vaurel, scratching his head helplessly. 'I half wish I had left him to die in the woods. He is going to upset the whole matter, curse him!'

We were greatly troubled by this unfortunate matter, which trebled all our anxieties and rendered almost futile the discussion of further plans concerning the colonel, for they might all be blown to the winds at a moment's notice by the capture of the madman by the villagers.

Vaurel ranged the woods all that day in search of him, but returned in a state of hopeless despondency and black anger.

'If I come across him I'll break his neck,' he growled, 'after all the care I gave him, to play us this trick.'

I persuaded him to go up to Mère Thibaud's in the evening, for he was sure to hear there if Roussel's escape had yet become known to the villagers.

He returned about nine o'clock, and I saw as soon as I opened the door to him that something had upset him. He was in a state of pallid anger, he had a great swollen bruise on his forehead, the blood from which had run down over his face, and for a time he could only gasp out angry oaths.

'What's happened? Have they got him?' I asked.

'Got him? No, but he's been seen, and they're as frightened as a lot of silly sheep. *Mon Dieu!* why

didn't I break his neck that first night when I knocked him over? I knew as soon as I got in there that they'd got wind of him. But now they say it's his ghost come back to haunt the place where he killed the captain. This one had caught sight of him, and that one had a glimpse of something, and there they were huddled together and looking over their shoulders in a mortal funk. And Juliot was there puffing and blowing, and trying to look fierce, and just as frightened as all the rest of them put together. Then the miller, Jean Lefèvre, pulled up there, instead of going straight home as he usually does, and he came in and let out at Juliot for permitting such a state of things.

"I was driving through the wood from Bessancy market," he said, "when a thing in white jumped out from the trees and ran in front of the horse, and screamed and flung its arms about, till the poor beast nearly died of fright, and then bolted, with that screaming white devil of a thing gibbering alongside. Thousand thunders! Juliot, my friend," said the miller, "if you can't put a stop to this kind of thing, I swear I'll have you removed."

"But—Monsieur Lefèvre," said Juliot, "the law takes no account of ghosts, and a ghost this is without doubt. He could not possibly be alive after all these days in the woods. Show me a criminal and I'll tackle him. But a ghost—who ever heard of arresting a ghost?"

"Well, anyway, he's in your district, my friend," said the miller, "and if you can't put a stop to him the sooner the authorities are informed of it the better."

"If I come across him I'll put a bullet through him," said Juliot, "but it won't have any effect. It's a priest and holy water you want for a job of this kind."

"You're growing childish, Juliot," said the miller, "or else you've had too much cognac," and then he left, and Juliot wanted to smash something.

"Well, monsieur, then I came home, and I took the

short cut through the wood, and, hang me! if he didn't jump out on me just the same way—flung up his arms and gibbered and snickered, and then away through the dark, and I got such a turn that I stumbled and knocked my head against a tree'—and he pointed to the big bruise on his forehead—'and when I found my feet he was gone.'

I fear our fount of charity as regards Roussel was pretty well run dry, and we both devoutly wished he might break his neck before he knocked all our plans into a cocked hat by getting himself caught.

CHAPTER XVII

CUTTING THE KNOTS

IN spite of ourselves and of the fact that all further plans concerning the colonel might be rendered abortive at any moment by this wretched madman, we fell to discussing possibilities.

It was evident that only three courses were open to us.

Either we must acknowledge ourselves beaten and set him free, which was not to be thought of for a moment:

Or, we must hand him over to the law, which indeed we might have to do at any moment if Roussel was caught, but which would not benefit us in any way:

Or, supposing Roussel fortunately came to grief and ceased to trouble us, we could continue our present course of treatment—here or elsewhere. And on those last words the whole matter, so far as the colonel was concerned, and apart from the Roussel complication, seemed to hinge, and we found ourselves debating it as earnestly as though no Roussel existed.

Vaurel acknowledged that if a hue and cry were started on the colonel's account we might be subject to a visit from the detectives at any moment. But nothing of the kind was at all likely for another week or ten days, and in that time it was to be hoped that the colonel would come to a more reasonable frame of mind and open his mouth.

'I don't know,' I said. 'It seems to me he may go on this way till doomsday.'

'Ah, you began feeding him too soon, monsieur,' said Vaurel; 'if you had waited a day or two longer it would have shortened the time now.'

'It would probably have shortened his time, my friend, and I was not prepared to do that.'

'Well, unless we are prepared to lose the game we have got to hold on to him. Monsieur does not suggest throwing down the cards?'

'Not a bit of it. I am keener than ever to learn all he can tell, and Mademoiselle is hungering for news.'

'Then, monsieur, we must find another cage for the bird. For if once they put detectives on the matter they will soon work back here and smell out things which that gay little captain would never dream of if he lived to be a hundred and ten.'

'Another cage? But that will not be easy to find. Where do you suggest?'

'I must think that out,' said Vaurel, and sat sucking away at his pipe as though the answer lay in the bowl of it.

He sat for a long time in silence, and I saw by the slow curls from his pipe and the fixed look in his eyes that he was deep in the matter. Then I saw him glance across at me from under his brows once or twice as though in doubt whether to mention what was in his mind. And then he said, 'Monsieur is rich? Is it not so?'

'Yes,' I nodded.

‘And monsieur is a sailor?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then take him to the sea and keep him there till he speaks.’

‘To the sea? How?’ said I, surprised at the magnitude of the idea.

‘By the river—in a boat.’

I sat looking at him through the smoke, and the possibilities of it all began to grow upon me.

‘Do you know I think that’s a great idea of yours, Vaurel,’ and I sat far into the night and smoked many pipes upon it, and it grew and it grew, with ever-widening bounds, till the end of it all was far beyond my ken. It was all vague and shadowy, but somewhere in it, like a golden glory, was a vision of Mademoiselle—how I did not quite know, but she was there—and her brother was there too, and we sailed over summer seas, and the days were not long enough for our enjoyment of them.

Vaurel sat patiently watching me through the smoke till he saw that I saw my way.

‘Will it do, monsieur?’

‘It will do grandly. How will you get him to the sea? Have you a boat? The punt would not do.’

‘I have thought of that. There is a boat belonging to the château, in which Ma’m’selle and Monsieur Gaston used to play when they were children. It is here in the cellar, but it has not been used for God knows how long. It will want repairing. We might get it up in the morning. It’s a heavy tub of a thing, but if we can make it tight it is as safe as a house.’

‘We shall see to it first thing, and then I shall start at once for Southampton. I think I had better call at Combourg on my way, Vaurel,’ I said tentatively.

‘Why, certainly, monsieur. Ma’m’selle will be anxious for news.’

‘It will take me at least a week to get hold of just the kind of boat I want, and we had better allow a

margin of three days to bring her round to the mouth of the river. How long will it take you to bring him down, and how will you manage it? You can't do it all single handed.'

'I'll manage it right enough if the madman's disposed of. I'll tie him hand and foot and gag him, and cart him down to the boat in a barrow. Then I'll cover him over with sacks and down we go. It will take me less than half a day to get to the sea. Everybody knows me and nobody will ask any questions.'

'You can't tie him and gag him single handed.'

'I and Boulot and a revolver will manage that all right, monsieur, have no fears. If I need help I'll get Louis Vard. He's safe—'

He suddenly laid his hand on my arm, and said in a whisper, 'Listen!'

We listened in blank, staring silence, and far away in the darkness outside, faint and dim through the closed windows, there came a long-drawn wailing cry.

'I thought I heard it before,' whispered Vaurel, and got up softly and opened the windows as noiselessly as though any undue sound might reach the ears of the distant wailer. 'It's him!'

The woods looked dark and eerie as we stood there looking out over them, straining our ears to catch that most uncanny cry again.

'Are you sure?' I whispered.

'Nothing else could make a sound like that.'

'Wild cats,' I suggested.

'We have none.'

Thin and distant the mournful cry came again out of the darkness, from the direction of the old mill of Bessancy. Vaurel shifted uneasily on his feet in a momentary indecision, and then said, 'I'm going after him.'

'It is quite useless, my friend; you might as well look for a needle in a haystack as look for him in those woods.'

'I'll have a try anyhow,' he said; 'I'll take the dog. Do you keep an ear on the colonel, monsieur.'

He went quickly down the hall and unloosed Boulot.

'*Au revoir!*' whispered Vaurel as he passed me.

They went down the steps of the terrace and the darkness swallowed them up. For a time I could follow their course by Boulot's snuffles, and then the silence and the darkness dropped down upon me again.

I stood there leaning over the stone balustrade, and straining after them, and heard no sound but the falling of the water over the weir, and then, after what seemed an interminable time there came from the distant woods the sharp report of a gun and the barking of a dog, and all my anxieties increased, for Vaurel, I knew, had taken no firearms with him.

The light from the open window behind me cut a solid shaft out of the darkness. It streamed across the terrace and over the balustrades, and cast their shadows and mine far out over the lawn below.

And as I leaned there motionless, peering out into the darkness, I became suddenly aware of the passage of something or somebody between the light and myself. There was a disturbance of the lights and shadows in front of me and yet I had not moved a limb.

My first thought was of the colonel. Could he have broken loose and come out through the window? I turned quietly, half expecting to see him peering out, but instead I saw that the light was blocked by the wild figure of a man looking in. And such a figure!—hair all a-bristle, thin, bony arms and legs all bare, the remnants of his nightshirt hanging round him in rags—Roussel. His hands rested on the sides of the open window and he leaned forward on them, looking into the room.

I tiptoed across the terrace, hoping to grip him before he turned. But he heard me and turned and fled into the darkness along the terrace, leaving a rag of his garment in my hand. I sprang after him, but

he went as swift and noiseless as a shadow, and when I reached the corner there was nothing but the darkness and not a sound to break it. I dared not follow and leave the house with its more valuable prisoner entirely unguarded. I stood and listened, and then returned to my post on the terrace, and presently Boulot came snuffling out of the dark, and close behind him over the turf came his master.

‘What was the shooting?’ I asked.

‘That thick-headed fool Juliot. He was lying in wait for the madman, and took me for him, or he says so, and blazed away at me. Fortunately he was too frightened to aim straight. I punched that silly head of his, laced hat and all, but we saw nothing of the other.’

‘He has been here.’

‘Here! *Nom de Dieu!* how is that?’

I told him, and of my attempt to catch the madman.

‘*Dieu de Dieu!* I wish I could come within arm’s length of him,’ he said. ‘But he can’t last long, and if he meets that other fool in the dark he’ll probably get his *congé* quick, unless the other’s as scared as he was when I ran into him.’

We closed the windows and drew the curtains, and turned again to the solace of our pipes and to spasmodic discussion of the situation.

If the boat could be found—and Vaurel asserted that he could take me to it blindfold, as it was he himself that laid it up after its last using by the children—and if it could be made usable—and of that he expressed very little doubt—then the idea of taking Colonel Lepard down to the sea, to a yacht which I would hire in Southampton, and of holding him there prisoner absolutely at our discretion, was the best scheme possible under the circumstances. But we could not get away from the fact that everything—all our schemes, Lepard’s future, Gaston’s future, Mademoiselle’s future—all depended on this wretched madman, and under the circumstances the concoction of plans respecting

any of these matters, while Roussel was still at large, was very like the fabrication of matches over a powder magazine.

'Hang it, Vaurel! isn't it possible to lay some trap for him? We must get hold of him by some means or other,' I said.

'Best trap would be the muzzle of that fool Juliot's gun, monsieur, but I don't see how we're to get him in front of it.'

'We must save him from that, if possible, my friend. He is in a pitiable state, poor devil, but there's no need why he should be shot like a dog.'

Vaurel grunted non-committally. He had not quite recovered his equanimity from the events of the evening.

My thoughts wandered back to the gaunt figure of Roussel peering in at the window, and an idea came to me suddenly.

'See here, Vaurel, he is starving both inside and out. It was the light of the room attracted him. Perhaps he hoped to find something to eat. Suppose we try that again? We'll put food on the table, and leave the window open and the lights up—'

'He will not come back, monsieur.'

'He may; there's no saying. Anyhow, it's easy to try it. Then we will hide, you and I, say behind those curtains, one on each side of the window. If he should come in we have him.'

'*Bien!*' we can try, but I doubt if anything will come of it. To-night?' he asked.

'No good to-night, I should say. He's been scared off for to-night. But we'll try to-morrow night and the next night, and the night after that. It's really no good my going; in fact, we can do nothing till this wretched Roussel is disposed of. If we can lay hands on him we must think out some plan of getting him to Paris and putting him in hospital there.'

'I wish to God he was there now,' said Vaurel,

fervently. 'He ties our hands, and every day may be of consequence.'

In the morning, after our usual inspection of the prisoner, and the usual offer of release in exchange for information, which was met with the usual sullen scowl and tightening of the hollow black cheek, we descended to the cellars, and Vaurel, as he had said, led me straight to the boat, which lay on its chocks, carefully covered with a tarpaulin, and with its wheeled carriage beside it. We examined it carefully, and found its timbers sound enough, and it seemed likely that a few days' soaking in the river would make it as tight as a drum. We loaded it up at once, and Vaurel unbolted the door at the end of the passage which led out on the level, at the south end of the château, and we trundled the boat across the lawns down to the river. She took in water slowly through the seams when we both got into her, so we filled her and tied her to the bank, and left her there awash to soak at her leisure. Then Vaurel went back to the cellar to sort out her gear, and I strolled on along the bank, thinking of Mademoiselle, and wondering greatly if all my efforts on her behalf, and all my hopes on my own, were to end in failure because of the craziness of Roussel and the contumacy of Lepard.

We duly laid our trap that night. We spread the table in full view of the window. We left the window wide open and the lamps lit. We flattened ourselves against the wall behind the window curtains, and waited in silent patience for what seemed endless hours.

But nothing came of it, somewhat to Vaurel's satisfaction, I think, for he had no faith in my plan, and he closed the windows, and drew the curtains, and dropped into a chair with a sigh of relief at last, and said, 'That's worse than shot drill. I always did hate standing still. It's the hardest work in the world.'

Then he charged his pipe, and poured himself

out a glassful of red wine, and made himself comfortable.

We were both on the *qui vive* for Roussel's uncanny cry, but the evening passed quietly, and we were both tired enough to be glad to go off early to bed.

I woke with a start in the middle of the night, and found myself in a cold sweat of something very like terror, though I had no idea what had caused it. But in another moment I knew, for there it came again, starting all the echoes through the great empty house, the long-drawn pitiful wail that we had heard the night before. It was the cry of a lost soul, and though I knew perfectly well that the lost soul was Roussel, cold chills crept up my spine, and I felt the hair at the back of my head begin to bristle.

I heard one terrified howl from Boulot, and then he was silent. I sprang out of bed and stumbled to the door. The madman was in the house somewhere, and we must find him. I felt my way to Vaurel's room, which was only a few steps down the passage, and my flesh chilled and prickled as I went lest I should run into the terror in the dark.

'Vaurel!' I hissed.

There was no answer, but I heard the bed shake, and felt my way towards it.

He was under the bedclothes in utter panic. He had, I supposed, been awakened out of his sleep as I had, and had not yet got over the fright of it.

'Vaurel,' I said, and put my hand on the writhing heap of bedclothes.

'*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*' he moaned from under the clothes.

I pulled the things down from over his head, in spite of his efforts to keep hidden, and said, 'Come out, Vaurel! Don't be a fool! Roussel is in the house somewhere.'

'*Mon Dieu!* is it you, monsieur?' he gasped. 'I thought it was the devil himself. Did you hear it?'

'Of course I heard it. It frightened me into a fit almost, but, after all, it's only Roussel, and we can tackle him. I wonder what the colonel thinks of it?'

'He'll think his master's come for him,' said Vaurel, recovering. 'Have you got your revolver, monsieur?'

Suddenly Boulot, in the hall, broke out into a fury of howls and yelps and screams of fear and rage, till the whole house rang again. We ran out on to the landing, and heard him flinging himself out the length of his cord, till the door rattled like a loose shutter in a gale, and when the cord brought him to a short turn, he choked and yelled, and sprang out again and again, for he had seen or smelt the man, and he no longer thought it was a ghost or the devil, as Vaurel said.

I must confess that I had no liking for going downstairs, but it was no good standing there in our shirts, and we cautiously began the descent, and derived a certain amount of courage from the jostling of our shoulders against one another.

Vaurel called to Boulot, and the dog gave a hoarse bark of joy at sound of him. Vaurel loosed his collar, and he dashed away with a yelp of satisfaction in the direction of the door that led to the cellar. We opened the cellar door and he hurled himself down, and we heard him worrying around with short barks and yelps, and then away he went across the lawn.

'Thousand devils!' said Vaurel, 'I must have left that cellar door open.'

That was undoubtedly what had happened. Roussel, prowling round the house, had come upon the open door, and strayed into the cellars. He had doubtless come up the cellar steps, and when Boulot caught sight or wind of him, and burst out into that tornado of howls, the madman had fled.

It was no good thinking of sleep for that night. We threw on some things, and lighted the lamp in the room where we had been sitting, and Vaurel started

a fire, for the air was chilly, and we sat before the hissing logs, and smoked the rest of the night away. Boulot came back presently and flopped contentedly down at our feet, and intimated his intention of spending the night before the fire, and we could not find it in our hearts to disturb him.

Vaurel did not attempt to conceal the fright he had had. '*Dieu de Dieu!*' he said, 'I woke in a fright, and did not know what it was, and when I heard the next howl I was certain it was the devil come in person for the colonel. But it seemed to me he might make a mistake if he was wandering around loose like that, and when I felt your hand on me, monsieur, I felt sure he had got me, though what good the bed-clothes would have been against him I didn't stop to think. And you, monsieur, you had no fear?'

'Hadn't I? Why, my hair was standing on end, and my legs felt stuck full of prickles, but I came to my senses sooner than you did.'

'—— that gibbering idiot!' said Vaurel. 'I never had such a fright in my life, never! *Mon Dieu!* I would like to know what the colonel made of it all.'

To judge by the colonel's face next morning when we visited him he had had quite as bad a time as the rest of us. He was the colour of lead, and his eyes had a scared look in them, but the bristly black cheek was clenched as tight as ever, and he spoke never a word.

Vaurel ostentatiously bolted the outside cellar door while it was still daylight next day. He laughed at me when I suggested laying the trap again for Roussel, but finally consented, and we arranged the room as before, and took our stand behind the curtains on each side of the open window. Never a sound came, and we waited and waited—hours longer, it seemed to me, than on the previous night.

Then, just as I was on the point of giving it up again as a bad job, my heart gave a leap into my throat, and the cold chill of the previous night began to creep out

on me again, for without the slightest sound I saw, through the slit between the curtain and the wall, a gaunt, bristling head come sneaking in at the window. The wild eyes rolled round the room, and seemed to start out of their sunken caverns at sight of the food and wine on the table. Something clucked in his throat, and he began to dribble at the mouth. He was evidently leaning forward with his hands on the sides of the window as I had seen him that other night.

Cautiously, soundlessly one thin, hairy leg came inside, then there was a crash outside, the poor fool threw up his arms with a shrill, womanly scream, and fell forward in a heap on the floor and lay still, and as we sprang out from behind the curtains the window was suddenly filled with the blue and silver figure of the *gendarme* Juliot, and the smoke was still curling in the barrel of his rifle.

'*Voilà, messieurs!*' he said triumphantly. 'That I think puts an end to the ghost,' and to me, '*Tiens! monsieur, I did not know you were here still.*'

'He is finished,' said Vaurel. 'You had it all your own way this time, Monsieur Juliot.'

'The people up there,' said the *gendarme*, jerking his head in the direction of the village, 'are having fits about him. I had to take the matter in hand myself.'

'It is just as well it is ended,' said Vaurel. 'Have some cognac, Monsieur Juliot?'

'I don't mind if I do,' said the *gendarme*; 'he got on my nerves somewhat. I've been watching for him all the evening. *Mon Dieu!* what's that?'

That was Boulot having a little altercation with the colonel.

'It's the dog after the rats. I'll call him,' said Vaurel.

'No, no, leave him, let him enjoy himself. He and I do not get on too well together. Let him enjoy the rats.'

We gave Juliot as much cognac as was good for him, and then in the dim dawn I persuaded the two

men to carry the poor frail body up to the village, and felt much easier in my mind now that one of our stumbling-blocks was removed.

CHAPTER XVIII

A HASTY WOOING

WHEN Vaurel got back we settled our final arrangements. I was to let him know by wire, post, or messenger, the exact day, and as nearly as possible the hour, when I would be at the mouth of the river ready to receive the colonel, and he undertook to be there.

Then I packed my belongings, including 'Mdlle. X.,' and slept little that night, in spite of my weariness, for the longing that was in me to be up and away, and for the hope that was in me of seeing Mademoiselle herself next day, which set my heart jumping and my pulses galloping.

In the early morning we ventured to leave the colonel in custody of Boulot, and took the wood path past Vaurel's house to the station, in time for the early train to Rennes.

'Tell Ma'm'selle that we will win if we hold him till he dies, monsieur,' said Vaurel, as he wrung my hand and looked as if he were going to embrace me.

I was in Combours by eleven o'clock, and leaving my baggage at the station, found my way without difficulty to the Convent of the Sacred Heart.

It stood a short way out of the village and was a great and unprepossessing establishment, with immensely high walls and an unpretentious door, which, if it suggested no warm welcome to outsiders, certainly gave one the impression that what it held inside was very tightly held indeed. In the middle of the

door was a tiny grating closed with a sliding panel, which somehow brought Madame of St Ouen and her downcast eyes vividly to my mind. An iron handle hung from a chain by the side of the tight-lipped door, and I gave it a pull that woke a tinkling response somewhere far away inside.

Time was evidently of little account with the occupants of the convent. It was full five minutes before the blind eye in the door opened noiselessly and showed me a pale, coiffed face behind it, which swallowed me whole in one hasty glance and then looked down, as though I were the world and the flesh and the devil all rolled into one.

'Madame the Duchesse of St Ouen?' I said in English, and pushed my card through the grating, which closed immediately and left me to hope that something might eventually come of it.

The privilege I sought was evidently one that needed time for consideration and was not readily accorded. I smoked four horrible Caporal cigarettes before the little veiled eye winked again sufficiently to allow the passage of a folded slip of paper, on which was inscribed in thin wiry letters, 'Madame regrets that she cannot receive M. Lamont.'

I fear the language I used, though I had the sense to keep it below my breath, would not have prospered my cause with the saints inside, as I hung in the wind uncertain what to do next. I smoked several more of the vile little cigarettes, and came to the wise decision of seeking out the curé of the village and asking his advice. If he were a decent fellow he might assist me; at the worst he could only refuse.

I found the curé without difficulty, and if I had had him made to order he could not have been more to my liking. He was a round-faced, jovial little man of about sixty, by name Père Joseph Bonnatt and he spoke English fluently with a strong Irish accent, which he explained by the fact of his having lived

for several years in the States, and incidentally that his mother was an Irishwoman.

We became good friends immediately, and when I told him of my difficulty he laughed loud and long.

'You expected to walk into the Convent of the Sacred Heart on presentation of your card? Why, my dear young friend, no male foot has ever defiled those sacred precincts, save that of the Cardinal Archbishop, Monsiegnur Godefroi, and even then I believe they had all to do penance for a week, besides double scrubbing the floors of every room he entered. But what is it you want there, or, I should say, who? Not Madame Mère herself?'

'No, it is my cousin, Mademoiselle Denise des Comptes, whose affairs I am looking after, and it is absolutely necessary that I should see her.'

'Ah, Mademoiselle des Comptes. That is the wealthy novice whom Madame Mère is hoping to persuade into the order—sister of that young Gaston des Comptes who—yes, yes, I know all about it. And monsieur is her cousin?'

I nodded without a blush. Had not Mademoiselle herself elected me to that high position, and who had a better right? We cannot choose our parents, but we can choose our *soi-disant* cousins.

'I doubt if I can help you in the matter,' said Père Bonnatt, 'though I would very much like to do so. Madame and I are not on speaking terms. You see she comes from above, I from below. She is an aristocrat, I spring from the soil. Now, let me see,' he said, biting his thumb in perplexity—'let me see— You did not tell her what you wanted?' he asked suddenly.

'I had no chance to tell her anything. But I guess she knows well enough what I wanted. She was staying with us down at Mademoiselle's house at Cour-des-Comptes, with the Abbé Dieufoy.'

'Ah, yes, the Abbé Dieufoy. He is *bon garçon*? ' and he looked at me whimsically.

'We got on very well together. He is shrewd and sharp, I should say, but we were on friendly enough terms.'

He nodded, and took counsel with his thumb again. Then he looked up with a twinkle in his eye.

'If I mention a matter to you, M. Lamont, you must not take any undue advantage of it—unless you very much want to.'

'I promise,' I said.

'Well, as I came from the station this morning I met a round dozen of the doves from the big nest there, and among them was a young lady, who was with them but not of them. Is your cousin a tall girl with brown hair, and rather good looking?'

'She is the most beautiful girl—' I began, but stopped short at sight of his twinkling eyes.

'It was doubtless she. They were, I judged, going to Dol, where there is a grand fête to the Virgin to-day. Now, if you should happen to be about the station when the train from Dol comes in, you might happen to see your cousin, you know, and who could stop you speaking to her, if you made up your mind to do it, I don't quite know. But, mind you, you are not to make any use of this information unless—'

'What time does the train come in?'

'Four o'clock.'

When the train came in I was waiting for it. The red-tape observances of the larger stations did not obtain in this rural district, and I had been permitted to take up my stand in a secluded corner of the platform without any objections on the part of the officials.

The train was crowded with women and children returning from the fête, but the Combours contingent was not a large one, and from my corner I eagerly watched the Sisters of the Sacred Heart dump themselves down on to the platform with all the graceless weight of so many sacks of flour.

They struck me as a singularly lumpy and stolid set

of young women, but their downcast eyes, and coif-bandaged faces and ill-shaped garments might well transform an angel of beauty into a Sister of the Sacred Heart. I was wondering if Mademoiselle would have been made to adopt the uniform, and how she would look in it, and my heart was beginning to sink at the thought that she was not there after all, when she jumped lightly down, the last of them all, and turned to speak to half-a-dozen children, who had evidently been enjoying her attentions on the journey and who crowded to the door to bid her adieu.

How tall and gracious and beautiful she looked beside the others, a queen lily in a bed of cabbages, though her sweet face sank into a soberness almost equal to theirs as the children passed and she turned to join her companions.

Then some sudden delightful instinct caused her to look up, right into my corner. If she had known I was there she could not have looked at me straighter, and my heart leaped joyfully and beat a triumphant march at the sudden glad light that shone out of her eyes and the lovely colour that swept into her face at sight of me.

The sisters had gathered round her like a body-guard of protecting hens, but I pushed through them with a 'Pardon, pardon, ma'm'selle!' right and left, and met Denise half way.

'Oh, Cousin Hugh!' she cried, and blushed deeper still at the word. 'How glad I am to see you!'

'Not more glad than I am—Denise! But I could not come before. Where can I speak with you? I have a great deal to tell you.'

She spoke rapidly to the dourest of the sisters, whose austere upper lip was ornamented with a slight black moustache, and whose flat bosom was decorated with a larger brass crucifix than any of the others. The sister pursed her thin lips still tighter, and murmured. Mademoiselle insisted, with a touch of anger, that she had a right to speak to her cousin,

and that she intended to in any case, and the sister yielded to the point of permitting half her flock to go on in front of us and half to follow behind, while we two walked together in between.

'Mr Lamont,' said Mademoiselle, before I had time to begin my story, 'I must get away from here. I am sorry I ever came. It will kill me if I stop much longer. It is not peace—for me at all events—it is imprisonment, and I cannot stand it. This is the first time I have passed the gate since I went there. It is crushing the spirit out of me. If I stop here much longer I shall be like the rest of them. I would sooner work for my living and let them have all the money than stop here.'

She poured all this out in a quick, hot torrent that came straight from her heart, and her face and eyes were all aflame with the strong feeling that was in her.

My heart leaped towards her and shouted 'Come with me! come with me!' but I managed to keep silent.

'It was a mistake my coming here,' she said again. 'I was afraid of it, but you advised it and I came. But—but—you promised to help me. You must get me away or I shall die, or become a nun, which is worse. Now what can you do to help me?'

'You trust me, Denise?'

'Absolutely! You know I do. More, I—'

I do not know what she was going to say, for she was in a state of very great excitement.

'Then let me take you away for good and all. Come and be my wife.'

'Oh, Hugh, do you mean it?' she cried.

'I have meant it since the first moment I saw your picture in the Salon. You know it, Denise.'

'Yes,' she said in a whisper, 'I knew it.'

She walked in silence for a moment, and then said eagerly, 'When? Now?'

'Can you stand it another week, dearest?' I said, and then I told her rapidly of the position of affairs

at Cour-des-Comptes, and of our decision to carry the colonel off to sea and to hold him there until he spoke.

‘I am going now to Southampton, to charter a yacht. I can be back here in a week. The yacht can wait at St Malo. What do you say?’

‘I shall count the hours,’ she said joyfully. ‘I can stand it now.’

‘How am I to get at you?’ I asked. ‘I tried to see Madame Mère, but she declined the pleasure, and the little curé here tells me no man is allowed to set foot inside these big walls.’

‘And it may be a month before I am allowed outside again. What can we do?’

‘I will manage it somehow. You are quite sure—?’

‘I am quite sure,’ she said quickly.

‘And you will be ready when—’

‘I shall be ready,’ she said, and then, softly and sweetly, as we drew near to the convent gate, ‘You have made me very happy, Hugh.’

It was surely as strange a wooing as man could well have. I had hardly dared to look at her, and as for touching her hand in the midst of that phalanx of marble modesty, it was not to be thought of for a moment. What pains and penances it might have subjected my dear girl to I could not imagine, but I was very desirous of doing nothing to shock the feelings of her keepers, and when the moment of parting came I did no more than touch the tips of her fingers and looked the rest of all I felt, and then bowed obsequiously to the cold-faced sisterhood and walked away on air, the richest man in all the world.

I went straight back to Père Bonnatt, and as soon as he saw me he said, ‘*Eh, bien!* You have seen her?’

‘I have seen her and spoken to her, thanks to you.’

‘Nay, nay, do not incriminate me,’ he laughed, ‘though it is a pleasure to me to get round the old lady. She is so very, very good, and so very, very wanting in heart.’

I was strongly tempted to tell him the whole matter, and it would have been such a very great pleasure to talk to somebody of Mademoiselle. But I had the common sense not to do so, and maybe it was just as well.

CHAPTER XIX

PRELIMINARIES

I WAS fortunate in my quest at Southampton. Butlers, the yacht agents, had a fine two-hundred-ton schooner yacht, sail and steam, placed in their hands only the day before. She belonged to young Lord Derrismore, who had started in her for a cruise in the Mediterranean, but had fallen in with an American millionairess at Nice and had thrown up his cruise for more lucrative business on shore, and had sent the boat home in charge of her captain with instructions to Butlers to let her for six months if they could.

She was a very handsome and roomy boat, beautifully fitted, and well found in every respect, and her crew were mostly willing to sign on for a new cruise in place of the one that had fallen through. She was called the *Clutha*, and her captain was a young Scot hailing from Port-Glasgow, by name Andrew Lyle, a fine, bright fellow to whom I took a great liking. So I signed the agreements and left Lyle to get her ready for a long voyage, and then ran up to town.

I had been puzzling my brain, ever since I parted from Mademoiselle, as to the best way of getting her out of the clutches of Madame de St Ouen, and I had at last hit upon a scheme which seemed to me to be at least possible. But it required legal assistance to carry it through, and I went straight to Mr George

Dayrell, of Lincoln's Inn Fields, who was the London agent of Layton's of Liverpool, and with whom I had had some dealings before I left England. He was a tall, strapping, jovial fellow, with a merry laugh and more of the look of a cavalry officer than of a solicitor, and he was just the man to further my plans, I thought.

He welcomed me very heartily and was immensely interested in all my doings. He begged me to dine with him at his club that night, and after dinner, over coffee and cigars in the most secluded corner of a cosy little smoking-room upstairs, I told him such portion of my story as I deemed necessary, and developed my plans.

'You want to rob a convent of its brightest ornament,' he began.

'But she is only there in trust, so to speak. She has not joined the order.'

'Quite so, but they are, I presume, just as desirous of keeping the young lady in as you are of getting her out, and you want me to help you to get her out. It appeals to me strongly, and I don't think your plan can be improved on. It may slip up, of course, but on the other hand it has every chance of success, and I don't see any better one. I know some parts of the country about there. If I were you I should drive over from St Servan. If you have to hang about waiting for trains it might be awkward, don't you know. You leave the documents to me. I'll draw them up such a screed as will twist their brains into a knot if they try to make head or tail of it, and I'll cover it with seals till a country notary will bow down and worship it. Oh, I'll fix that part all right. I'd mighty well like to go along and see the fun.'

'It might not be a bad idea,' I said. 'Think it over. I must start for Southampton on Wednesday. You could bully the notary and make him do what is wanted.'

'Gad, I'll go! I wouldn't miss it for fifty pounds.'

I've nothing important on this week, and it'll be as good as a pantomime.'

'There is one other matter I want you to see to for me, Dayrell.'

'Yes?'

'I want a special license.'

'That's easy—Doctors' Commons—fee twenty-nine pounds eight shillings. Come along to the office in the morning and we'll trot around and get it. This is the kind of job I like—smack of Gretna Green about it, don't you know. Young lady of age?'

'I'm sure I don't know. Suppose we assume it.'

'Parents living?'

'No—both dead.'

'That's better—from this particular point of view, I mean. They're particular on the French side as to parents' consent, you know.'

We ran down to Southampton on the Tuesday afternoon and found the preparations on the *Clutha* approaching completion.

Dayrell was delighted with the look of her. 'She's a beauty and no mistake,' he said. 'Say, Lamont, she makes me wish I was going along with you afterwards.'

'And what about the anxious clients cooling their heels in Lincoln's Inn Fields?' I said.

'Oh, hang the clients! It'd give them time to think better of it and not make fools of themselves.'

We made an early start and a quick run across, and by eight o'clock in the evening were lying at anchor outside the mole of St Malo.

'Let's go ashore at once, I want to hunt up a notary,' said Dayrell; 'I want him to write to-night to the Mother Superior making an appointment for Mademoiselle des Comptes for to-morrow morning. I'll fix the time as soon as I can get hold of a timetable and find out when there's no train back from Combours to this place.'

We went straight to the offices of the South-

Western Railway Company, and Dayrell, putting on his most impressive legal manner, inquired the name of the leading notary in the town.

The clerk mentioned several.

‘Do any of them speak English, I wonder?’ said Dayrell. ‘This is a matter of some importance and I can’t afford to have any misunderstandings.’

‘M. Lanoë speaks English well. He doesn’t perhaps stand quite so high as M. Lecompte, but M. Lecompte unfortunately neither speaks nor writes English.’

‘Thanks. M. Lenoë is evidently the man, but I may as well have both addresses in case one of them should not be available.’ And he went straight to M. Lecompte.

He was elderly, extremely polished in his manners, and—he didn’t understand a word of English.

Dayrell clothed himself in impressiveness and legalities. He spoke French admirably, and explained what we wanted clearly and distinctly, and the old gentleman took the job in hand with extreme willingness.

‘Mademoiselle des Comptes,’ said Dayrell, ‘who is at present, we are informed, staying with Madame the Duchesse de St Ouen, the Mother Superior of the Convent of the Sacred Heart at Combours, is, as monsieur is doubtless aware, of English extraction on her mother’s side. These documents’—he flourished his roll of parchments, which looked extremely formidable, with black-letter inscriptions bristling up amid the neatly-engrossed text, and massive red seals dangling by green ribbons—‘these documents are of extreme importance and have to be signed by Mademoiselle in person in the presence of a notary of standing.’ M. Lecompte bowed. ‘The matter is somewhat urgent, and expense is no object. If, therefore, M. Lecompte, you can make it convenient to come over to Combours with me to-morrow morning, I would ask you to write at once to Madame the Duchesse requesting her to permit you to meet Made-

moiselle. Now where can you transact the business? Is there a notary at Cambourg, I wonder?'

'No!' said M. Lecompte, with a decisive shake of the head. 'There is not.'

'H'm! then where—? Mademoiselle cannot well sign in the roadway.'

'There is the inn,' suggested M. Lecompte.

'Of course, that will do quite well. Will you then, M. Lecompte, have the extreme kindness to write at once explaining the matter to madame, and saying that you will await Mademoiselle at the inn at—what time shall we say?'

'There is a train about half-past twelve, getting there about half-past one.'

'Then suppose we say two o'clock at the inn. I wonder what time there is a train back?'

'There is no train back till five o'clock,' said M. Lecompte, consulting his time-table.

'Ah, then it practically means the whole day, and the steamer leaves at eight. Well, that will do very well. We can get our business done and get away to-morrow night,' he said, looking significantly at me.

'I will write at once,' said M. Lecompte. 'The post has gone, but my letter will reach madame by the early morning train and she will have it by eight o'clock.'

'That is no doubt as early as madame is likely to be up.'

'But no,' said the old gentleman, with a smile and a gentle shrug, 'madame is extremely devout. She is doubtless at her devotions each morning by five.'

'You know madame personally then, monsieur?'

'Oh, yes. I have transacted business for madame on several occasions.'

'So much the better for us,' said Dayrell, as we walked back to the harbour; 'madame will raise no questions and have no doubts, and mademoiselle will be there all right.'

'We will hire a carriage and pair in the morning,' he said. 'Will you drive yourself?'

'Certainly. I can manage that all right. How about finding the way?'

'Start about eleven and you will have heaps of time and can inquire all you want, and give the horses a good rest at the other end. I shall of course come back with you. We must get on board at once and scoot. As soon as they tumble to it and recover their wits they will no doubt set the telegraph to work and be on the lookout for us. Where will your boat meet us?'

'Up near the station, I thought. I'm told there is a good livery stable in St Servan.'

'We'll try it. You've got the young lady's rig-out and picked your man?'

'Didn't you notice him on board? I had him engaged on purpose.'

'That slim, smooth-faced young fellow with brown hair. I remember him. Well, it'll be touch and go, and there must be no hitches.'

'If Mademoiselle comes to the inn she shall never go back to the convent, if I have to tie them all to tables and chairs while I walk away with her.'

'I will settle with the old gentleman as we go down,' said Dayrell, 'and I'll make the fee so big that he won't feel hurt whatever happens. He'll have no difficulty in proving that he knew nothing about it. Lyle will be ready to upsteam and off the moment we get on board, of course.'

'He'll be ready, and I'll bless the moment Mademoiselle sets foot on the *Clutha*.'

And so our plans were complete, and as I leaned over the rail of the yacht before turning in and watched the lights ashore winking themselves out one by one, it seemed to me almost too good to believe that before these lights shone out again, if all went well, Mademoiselle—Denise—the sweetest and most beautiful girl in the whole wide world,

would be there by my side, never to leave it again so long as life lasted. The thought was a very pleasant one, and I kept it company till there were no lights left but the steady official ones along the quay, and the dimmer ones that swung uneasily at the mast heads in the harbour, and then at last I went below to continue my dreams and long for the hour when I could be up and doing.

I had had the portrait of 'Mdlle. X.' framed during my short stay in town, and it hung now in the saloon, and as I went down I stood long before it, glorying in the straight shy glance of the steadfast eyes, and I vowed by all that I held most sacred—and that was my love for my love—that never from word or thought or deed should she have cause to rue the day she placed her faith in me and her hand in mine.

CHAPTER XX

A SAILOR-BOY MY LOVE WAS SHE

My first visit next morning was to the telegraph office, where I sent this message to Prudent Vaurel, Château des Comptes, Cour-des-Comptes: 'Sunday morning—six o'clock.' As arranged between us he would understand that by that time I should be off the mouth of the river awaiting him and his prisoner.

As a matter of fact I expected to be there by six o'clock on Saturday afternoon, but it seemed to me better that he should travel by night as being less exposed to inquisition, and in any case it would not do for him to be awaiting us, whereas we could wait for him without inconvenience.

Then to the St Servan stables, where, by leaving a substantial deposit, I was able to secure a light *coupé*

and a pair of decent horses, and eleven o'clock found me jogging gently Combours-wards, with Jim Barrett, the slim, smooth-faced young sailor by my side on the box, and nothing inside but a tightly-strapped plaid.

Jim was dressed in his best Sunday pilot-cloth jacket, and a yachting stocking-cap on his brown head. He considered the stocking-cap quite out of place with the pilot-cloth jacket, and had wanted to wear his reefer with the yacht's name on it, and could not understand why I had insisted on his changing it. I now proceeded to enlighten him, and from the way he chuckled and slapped his knee I gathered that he greatly enjoyed the matter we were engaged upon.

We had no difficulty in keeping the Combours road, and we arrived at a little wayside inn about a mile from that centre of the world shortly before one o'clock.

They had not much accommodation, but I had the horses taken out and rubbed down, and gave them the best feed the place afforded. Then leaving word that we were going for a stroll and would want to start again in about an hour, Jim picked up that precious plaid and we started for the village, and as we drew near the inn my heart beat high, for there our venture was to be put to the test.

Dayrell had undertaken to keep M. Lecompte busy in any room they were able to procure, so I walked boldly in and asked the white-capped old landlady for a bedroom for the night.

She threw up her hands and doubted if it were possible.

'There are two gentlemen in my only room now, but I do not think they stop the night,' she said. 'Stay, I will ask them,' and she bustled away upstairs and came down presently. 'That is all right,' she said; 'they do not stop, so monsieur can have that room when they are done with it.'

'Good! I'll pay you for it at once. But meanwhile I want to wash my hands somewhere and to

leave this package. Haven't you another room I could use for a short time?'

'But certainly, monsieur,' said the old lady, beaming all over at the chink of the coins in her hand. 'Will monsieur give himself the trouble to come this way and he can use my own room till the other is at his disposal,' and she led me upstairs to a room alongside the one in which Dayrell and M. Lecompte were awaiting Mademoiselle. I could hear their voices through the wall. Barrett carried up the strapped plaid and madame fussed about and switched things under the bed.

'Monsieur will excuse,' she said with an ancient giggle, 'I did not expect company in my room. But there is water. I will get a clean towel.'

Then she left us alone, and as soon as her back was turned Barrett slipped quietly out of the house and took the road back to the place where we had left the carriage.

He had not been gone five minutes when a rustling down below, which presently came upstairs in the wake of the landlady, told me that Mademoiselle and a bodyguard of sisters had arrived, and that the crucial moment was at hand.

Their dresses swished against the door behind which I stood, and then I heard the scraping of chairs and the murmur of greetings in the next room. I had opened the plaid and laid out its contents on the bed—a natty new pair of wide sailor trousers with a leather belt, gauged to the best of my powers, a pilot-cloth jacket, a blue silk necktie, and a stocking-cap—all just like Jim Barrett's, and now I stood waiting with my heart going like a ship's pump.

Presently I heard voices in the passage. I opened the door and Denise was in my arms, between laughing and crying, and all a-quiver with suppressed excitement.

I kissed her once. I could not help it, and it only took a second of our precious time.

'Now, dearest,' I whispered hurriedly, 'dress in those sailor things as quickly as you can'—and she flamed red at the words—'bundle up such of your own things as you wish to take, in the plaid—anything you don't need fling under the bed—leave no visible signs of your transformation. I shall be waiting outside the door. Be as quick as you can.'

I joined Dayrell outside. Outwardly he was as cool as a fish, but his eyes were dancing and his face was alight with smiles.

'We win this hand, my boy,' he said, 'and by Gad! she's worth winning. I congratulate you, my son.'

'How did you manage to get her away from her keepers?'

'I begged their permission for five minutes' private conversation with Mademoiselle as her legal adviser. One of them, a sour-faced old hen with a moustache, was for coming with us, but I headed her off, and at the present moment they're admiring the legal document with its black lettering and big seals. They look on it as a second cousin to an illuminated missal, I think. I shall go in presently to say that Mademoiselle felt faint and the landlady is attending to her. Then I shall come out again to see how she is getting on and shall do a sprint along the road after you. It's straight along that way, I suppose?'

'Straight as you can go,' I said.

The door opened, and the loveliest red face this world has ever seen peeped timidly out and drew back quickly at sight of Dayrell. He put his finger to his lip and went into the other room. Denise came out with the hastily-bundled plaid in her shaking hands.

'I could not fasten it,' she whispered, and her eyes for once would not look at me.

I hurriedly fastened the straps and we went down the stairs. Some men drinking in a side room looked at us as we passed, and we were in the road.

'*Bien de Dieu!*' said an old crone at the corner,

'another sailor-man. The place is full of sailor-men to-day.'

We walked rapidly, and my companion showed a desire to keep behind me. It was not till we got out of the village that I really dared to look at her. Then I took her hand and slipped it through my arm, and we went on more rapidly still.

'Was all this necessary?' she whispered, with a mingling of remonstrance and laughter in her voice.

'It was, dearest. They may wire to St Malo to be on the lookout for the loveliest—'

She pinched my arm.

'Oh, somebody is coming after us,' she cried suddenly, as quick feet came along the road.

'It's all right. That's friend Dayrell. I couldn't have managed it alone. He's a capital fellow. There's the carriage just ahead. Now we're all right,' and as Dayrell tumbled in I whipped up the horses, and we started for St Malo and the new life.

'Famously done,' said Dayrell, as soon as he could speak; 'I'd give any money to see that old lady's face with the moustache when she finds the bird flown. Here, Lamont, get down and let me drive.'

The change was to our liking and was rapidly made. Dayrell handled the horses well and we went along at a spanking pace, and never in my life had I enjoyed a drive so much.

I drew the carriage rug well up round us and held the throbbing little fingers tight in mine below it. The colour deepened in the lovely face every time I ventured to look at it, but her eyes for the most part avoided mine and sought the travelling landscape outside. And, though I was loth to cause her any discomfort, it was almost impossible for me to keep my eyes off her. Lovely as she always was, there was now, by reason of the strangeness of her circumstances, an added piquancy which doubled all her charms. It was as much as I could do to keep from gathering

her into my arms and smothering her with kisses. But the sight of a well-dressed man in a carriage on the public highway smothering a handsome sailor-boy with kisses might have been too much even for the phlegmatic natives of Ille-et-Vilaine. So I had to content my hungry soul with such small crumbs of comfort as could be derived from gently-reciprocated squeezings of the little fingers under the rug, and from occasional hasty glances at the blushing face by my side. A delightful drive, but it had to come to an end.

The grey cathedral spire and the battlemented walls rose in front and we drew near to the straggling houses of St Servan. The *octroi* was passed without exciting any undue suspicions of concealed eggs or surreptitious pats of butter, and we were clattering through the stony streets. As we opened the harbour and turned in the direction of the livery stables, Barrett leaped down to go in search of the boat, and I noticed the quick, eager glance he stole at my companion, and the alacrity with which he went off to find his fellows and give them the points of the story.

We descended quietly at the stables, paid the bill and collected the deposit, praised the horses, and said what a quaint old town Dol was, and then walked along the front till we spied sailor Jim standing on the lookout for us. The yacht's boat was lying there between two smacks, and all the men's eyes were round with enjoyment of the situation as the new hand stepped daintily aboard, displaying the nattiest of little shoes as she did so, and I am quite sure Mademoiselle's first impression of that boat's crew was that they were the jolliest and merriest set of men she had ever set eyes on.

As soon as we had taken our seats Jim shoved her off and sat himself down in the well astern, and we went skimming down the inner harbour between the smacks and coasters, and past the rolling bridge, and round the end of the mole, and so at last to the

Clutha, and glad indeed and triumphant was my heart when we lay against her shining side, and Mademoiselle tripped up the ladder, and I felt that she was really and truly mine. The screws were churning foam astern before the boat ceased rocking at the davits, and we were off, heading straight for Southampton.

I led Denise downstairs at once to the cabin I had had prepared for her. Her eye fell on the picture as she passed through the saloon, and she stopped before it and stood looking at it.

'How very much has happened since then,' she said, 'and how very different I feel. Everything is changed.'

'For the better, I hope,' I said, and I raised the soft white hand to my lips and kissed it.

'For the better in some respects,' she said, looking calmly into my eyes. 'Now I only want Gaston, and then I shall be perfectly happy.'

'And Gaston you shall have, and we will all be happy together. Here is your cabin, dearest, and here is the plaid and your belongings,' and I went up on deck to join Dayrell and Lyle.

The yacht was making good time, and St Malo was already dwindling astern to the appearance of a very large church with a very tiny spire. But in front the sky was dark and seemed to grow darker every minute.

We were leaning over the railing watching the toy town behind, when a great cheer broke out forward, and as we turned we saw that it was caused by the reappearance of Mademoiselle. She was dressed in her own dress, but had flung the pilot-cloth jacket over her shoulders. The stocking-cap she carried in her hand, and the shining coils of her hair shimmered like dusky bronze in the level sunshine.

She had come up the companion, and was looking for me, when the men caught sight of her and gave her a cheer that brought the colour to her face and a sparkle of diamond drops to her eyes. She was taken by surprise at first, but as soon as she perceived that

it was herself that they were cheering, she waved the stocking-cap with a charming gesture of *camaraderie* by way of thanks, and the cheers broke out again and again. Then she caught sight of us astern and came along to meet us.

‘Why are they so pleased?’ she asked naïvely.

‘English sailors are great admirers of pluck and beauty,’ I said, ‘and they wanted to tell you how glad they all are that you got through all right. Now, Denise, let me formally introduce you to Mr George Dayrell of Lincoln’s Inn Fields. You have met before.’

‘Under different circumstances,’ said Dayrell, with his pleasant smile. ‘Permit me to add my congratulations to those of our friends forward, Mademoiselle. Our journey so far has been most auspicious. But I cannot help my thoughts wandering back at times to your gloomy-faced friend with the moustache. I wonder how she is faring?’

‘Poor Sister Cécile!’ said Denise, demurely; ‘I am afraid she will undergo penances of the severest, but it really was not her fault.’

‘No, the fault was entirely yours,’ I said, ‘and you are beyond the reach of penances.’

‘Entirely mine?’ she said; ‘and what about your share, messieurs?’

‘Oh, we were only there to assist—and admire the performance,’ laughed Dayrell, and Denise blushed rosy red.

Here Lyle came down from the bridge, as we were now outside the cordon of reefs and islets, and was introduced to his fair passenger, and added his congratulations in good broad Scotch and his tribute of admiration in eloquent silence.

After dinner Denise paced the deck with her arm pressing close in mine till the hours grew old. The stars winked encouragingly and the friendly darkness enfolded us. There was nothing to disturb us but the pounding of the waves against the sides of the gallant

little ship and the humming of the rising wind in the rigging up above, and, with the hunger of a starving man, I endeavoured to make up for the lost opportunities in the matter of wooing which force of circumstances had defrauded me of. But we did not speak much. We were together and that was enough.

‘Content, Denise?’ I whispered once.

She pressed my arm responsively.

‘Very happy,’ she said, ‘but never content till Gaston is free and cleared of all reproach.’

‘That comes next—after to-morrow,’ I whispered, and I knew that the rosy colour was in her face again, although I could not see it in the darkness.

That long, delightful stroll together on the deck of the *Clutha* as she swung through the night towards heaven will never be forgotten by either of us. It atoned in a measure for the missing past, and every turn of the screw brought us nearer to the wonderful future. And when at last we went down and were parting for the night, my pent-up passion broke bounds and I covered her face with kisses, until she pressed her rosy palms on my lips and broke away and ran into her room.

CHAPTER XXI

AN UNEXPECTED DIVERSION

WHEN I went below with Denise the Corbière light was winking out its congratulations and good wishes to us, and before I reached the deck again the schooner was beginning to feel the want of the protecting Jersey coast.

As I mounted the companion Lyle was coming down.

‘Oilskins,’ he said, ‘we’re going to have a tough time.’

‘Why, I saw no signs of it,’ I said.

At which he smiled, as much as to say, 'You were much more pleasantly occupied.'

What he did say was, 'It's gone as black as a hat and the wind rising every minute. We're only beginning to feel it now we're past Jersey. I'm going outside Guernsey; it's safer,' and he went on to get into his foul weather gear.

It was amazing the change a few minutes had made. The stars were hidden, the wind was blowing in strong gusts from the north-east, and the schooner's bow was chopping heavily into the great cross-seas, flinging them back in cascades of spray which the wind caught up before they fell and hurled squattering along the deck.

I did not like the look of things, and blamed myself for not having noticed the signs, but, as Lyle's quiet smile intimated, I had been much too busily occupied.

I waited at the head of the companion till he came up again.

'Couldn't we get into Guernsey?' I shouted into his ear. 'I don't want to expose Mademoiselle to any more of this than is necessary.'

'Too risky,' he shouted back, 'wouldn't care to try—safer in the open. She'll stand anything we're likely to get.'

But he referred to his ship, while I was thinking only of Mademoiselle.

The night was growing wilder every minute. One moment the screw was racing wild and free, and the next the white caps were seething through the netting of the stern railings. I would have given a small fortune to have had the *Clutha* safe in St Helier's or Peter's Port, but that was out of the question now, and to return to St Malo would have its dangers for us apart from the rocks and islands which encircle it. There was nothing for it but going ahead, and as a sailor I appreciated Lyle's preference for an open sea to attempting unknown ports bristling with hidden deaths.

'I want that companion bolted,' shouted Lyle. 'Are you up or down?'

'Up, in a second,' I shouted and ran down.

First to my own cabin for my thickest coat and cap. Then across to the door of Denise's room.

I tapped, and in a moment she opened it, and her white face glimmered in the jerking light of the saloon lamp.

'It's coming on to blow, dearest,' I said, 'and we shall get a shaking. You won't be frightened? The ship is as safe as a rock—but not quite as steady, I'm sorry to say,' I added, as a great sea caught her on the forward quarter and made her reel and shudder.

'I will not be frightened, Hugh,' she said.

I bent forward and kissed the white fingers which gripped the side of the doorway.

'Lie down, dearest,' I said. 'You will feel it less that way. I am going on deck to see if I can help.'

'There is no danger?' she asked.

'No danger, but we may have to run for it. The sea has risen so rapidly and it's blowing half a gale. Now, good-night again, dear one,' and I leaned forward and kissed the swaying white face, and she closed the door, and I put out the lamps in the saloon and climbed up on deck.

I bolted the companion door, and hung swaying by the coaming of the hatch till the chance should come for a rush to the little wheel-house amidships. When it came I made a dash for it. But just at the same moment, with a crash like thunder, a huge wave caught us on the starboard bow, and heaved up the front part of the ship till the stern was under water. An avalanche of foam came roaring along the deck and swept me fairly off my feet and jammed me against the stern railings, to which I clung like grim death while the water poured through and over me. Then I got on to my feet again and clawed my way by the rails, hand over hand, till I reached the deck-house.

There was another burly oilskin inside with Lyle, and it was a pretty tight fit for the three of us and the wheel.

'Hello, Lamont!' said Oilskin No. 2, showing Dayrell's merry face as it turned to me. 'We thought you had elected to stop below. We're going to have a devil of a time of it, old man,' he added in a tone of great enjoyment.

'We're having it,' I said. 'Got any whisky here, Lyle? That last wave went right through me. I haven't got a dry thread anywhere about me.'

'Left-hand locker,' he said, never taking his eyes off the waves ahead, and nursing the ship to the rapid onslaughts as best he could.

I found a metal flask of whisky in the locker, and a pull at it did me good.

The motion of the ship was becoming intolerable, and the thought of our passenger below decided me.

'You'd better turn and run for it, Lyle. We can't make head against this. It'll only strain her and maybe something'll give, and then there'll be the devil to pay.'

'Right,' he said, 'I only wanted you to suggest it,' and the little wheel spun round. The schooner's head payed off, she rolled heavily for a moment, and then the violent pitching ceased as she flew before the gale and kept ahead of the white-capped racers.

'That's better,' I said. 'I daren't think what Mademoiselle feels about all this.'

'Was she frightened?'

'No, but she's not a sailor-man, you know, and she's bound to suffer. Dayrell, you long-legged long-shoreman, why aren't you sick? You ought to be.'

'Never been sick in my life,' he said. 'This is immense. I think I shall chuck Lincoln's Inn and take to the sea—"the glorious the ever free"—"Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean—Ro-o-oll!"' he shouted, sitting down suddenly on the locker as the

yacht gave a drunken side lurch that made us all glad of something solid to grip on to.

'I suppose she'll stand it all right?' I asked Lyle.

'She's all right,' he said, 'but we've struck it strong. There's evidently been a big gale up in the North Sea, and it's coming along this way. We shan't see Southampton to-morrow, I'm thinking.'

'We probably wouldn't see it at all if we tried to make it through this,' I said.

'That's so. In a case of this kind take the line of least resistance as yon man on the *Pall Mall* would say.'

There was for me, as evidently also for Dayrell, a keen enjoyment in the roar, and rush, and the sense of battle, and for me too it was a renewal of many happy memories. It brought back the old life so vividly that I could almost imagine myself once more in the wheel-house of the *Servia*, with dear old Captain Hains snoozing just below, ready to be up and doing the moment he was wanted, and the roaring red funnel white with salt on the weather side right up to the black rim at the top.

But my anxious thoughts were never far from the fair girl down below, and I reproached myself much that I had not foreseen the possibility of such a thing as this, and brought along a stewardess for her comfort and assistance. But it had seemed so unnecessary for an eighteen hours' run across the Channel that I had not given the matter a second thought, and I feared much that Denise must be suffering exceedingly from my lack of foresight.

When the murky dawn came at last, bringing the tumult of the waters more closely home to us, I slipped down to my cabin and got into dry things, and then, with my heart all a-flutter, I tapped once more on the door of Denise's room.

It was only when I had knocked three times that I heard her plaintive '*entrez*,' so loud was the rush of the waves alongside and the roar of the gale up above.

I turned the handle and stepped reverently into this holy of holies.

She was lying on the bed like a storm-beaten lily, and I dropped on my knees beside it and put my arm over her neck and drew the pale, sweet face towards me, for my heart was very full.

'Denise, my beloved,' I said, 'I am so very sorry to have brought you into all this.'

'You could not know,' she said. 'It has been very terrible. I thought sometimes we were sinking.'

'Oh, there is no fear of that,' I said heartily. 'Dayrell is absolutely revelling in it up on deck, but you feel it more cooped up in here. Were you very sick?'

'No, I was hardly sick at all, but I felt as if I would like to die.'

'We won't talk of dying. It can't last long, and you'll be all right soon.'

'When shall we get there?'

'We can't quite tell. The gale is too strong for us yet, but it will blow itself out soon. Now I'm going to get you something to eat and drink.'

She raised a white, protesting hand, but I went out into the saloon, and first of all I collected all the cushions I could lay hands on, and with them I banked her up and hedged her round, so that she needed no longer to be all the time clinging to or fending off the side of the bunk as the ship rolled from side to side.

'That is better,' she said. 'Now I shan't be afraid of falling out. I was afraid if I went to sleep I might be thrown out head first.'

Then I opened a bottle of champagne and poured out half a tumblerful, and got some dry, hard biscuits and prevailed on her to take a few sips and nibbles.

'I will get you some hot coffee soon,' I said, 'but the champagne is a good tonic.'

'I think I shall go to sleep,' she said, settling down like a tired child among her cushions and pillows

and closing her eyes. I kissed the white forehead, and the large eyes opened and looked trustfully up at me, then the lovely face drooped sideways on the pillow and I saw that she was sleeping.

I stood for a moment looking down at her, the sweet centre and kernel of all our endeavour, round whom Lyle, and Dayrell, and I, and the ship, and all her crew and equipment, were but as an outer husk of protection, and not to be weighed against a single hair of her head. Then I went out, proud and grateful at a trust so complete, and very humble at thought of my own unworthiness of it all.

As soon as the steward turned out I got him to make some coffee and dry toast, but when I took them in to her she was still sleeping as peacefully as a child, and I would not disturb her.

I went up on deck and found Dayrell and Lyle still in the wheel-house, smoking comfortably and swopping experiences.

'You here yet, Dayrell?' I said. 'You'll be getting knocked up and then Lincoln's Inn will blame me. Hadn't you better turn in?'

'Oh, hang Lincoln's Inn,' he said. 'I tell you I'm going to turn sailor. Don't know when I enjoyed a night so much as last night. It was a little bit of the real thing.'

'Well, there's no accounting for tastes,' I said. 'Lincoln's Inn would suit most people better in weather like this.'

'How is the young lady standing it?' asked Lyle.

'She's asleep now that I have assured her the ship's not going to sink. What are our prospects, captain?'

'We can only go on as we are going till the gale breaks. I'll get up a rag of foresail after breakfast and save the coal; we'll need it all for the run home.'

We were running due south-west, straight out into the Atlantic. It was the only thing we could do, but it complicated matters all round.

Here was Friday, and we had to get back to Southampton to get married and to buy Denise all the things she needed, and to be at the mouth of the Vilaine to meet Vaurel and his prisoner by Sunday morning, and meanwhile we were running out into the Atlantic at sixteen knots an hour.

I hoped Vaurel would have the sense to take his man back again, but there's no knowing what might happen when he found we were not there. A dozen things might hinder him, but I had confidence in his pluck and common sense, and hoped for the best.

Denise slept till near mid-day, and then when I went down to see how she was getting on, to my surprise and very great joy her door opened and she came out into the saloon, handing herself along by the walls till she was able to clutch my arm.

'This is splendid,' I said, 'to see you up again.'

'It's not quite so rough, I think,' she said.

'We've got up a bit of a sail to save the coals, and that eases the rolling. Now you shall have a cup of coffee, and then perhaps you'll venture to the head of the companion to get a breath of fresh air.'

The sight of the rolling grey mountains, however, made her head swim, until she grew accustomed to them. Then the salt gale blew the sickness out of her brain and the colour into her cheeks, and presently I had her into the wheel-house, where old Jack Barnes the bo's'un was in charge, and gave her very hearty welcome.

'Bless you, no, miss, this ain't very rough. It do blow a bit, for sure, and the waves is a bit awkward an' she do need clever handling. But, you see, it's only a bit of a boat this, and we can't do what a bigger boat would sneeze at. Not but what I'll allow they've had it pretty bad over yonder'—jerking his head backwards—'an' maybe it was wiser not to temp' Providence too much with fightin' agin it. But as I said down below last night, there's no harm a-comin' to

this ship while there's a hangel aboard of her, an' so you may sleep easy in your bunks, my lads—that is, as easy as the little ship'll let yer, an' I've no doubt when Mr Lamont 'ears as how some o' them seas got inside an' damped us all, he tell old Squabbs to serve out double rations o' rum, and that'll make you warm inside if you're a bit dampish outside.'

Denise laughed merrily at this oration, and it was a glad sound to my ears.

'Do let them have it, Hugh,' she said.

'Why, certainly. Barnes you've missed your vocation, you ought to be in the diplomatic service.'

'Thankee, Mr Lamont, sir. It's main kind o' you to say so, but I'm well enough content to be where I am, an' I was brought up truthful an' honest.'

Dayrell and Lyle did not turn out till dinner-time, and the gong brought our full muster to table. We were all delighted at Mademoiselle's rapid recovery and did our utmost to prevent the awkwardness of the situation obtruding themselves upon her.

That she fully sounded them I knew, but I knew also that her trust in me was perfect, and the knowledge made my heart beat high and strong. She showed no slightest sign of embarrassment, and her manner was perfectly simple and natural. Her great concern was about Vaurel, and the impossibility of our keeping our appointment with him, and that was a matter we could not discuss before the others, as at present they knew nothing about it.

'Did you give the men their extra allowance?' asked Denise.

'In the captain's absence I asked Squabbs to do so,' and I retailed them Barnes's invocation.

'He's a wily old chap, but a first-rate seaman,' said Lyle. 'I've known him for many years. And I've no doubt they did get a bit damp last night, but I doubt if he made that speech until he set eyes on Mademoiselle.'

'No signs of the gale breaking yet, captain?' I asked.

'Not a sign of it. It looks as if it was going to carry us right across to the West Indies.'

'*Ciel!*' said Denise, looking at me and thinking of Vaurel.

'We'll hope it won't be quite as bad as that,' said Dayrell. 'They'll be advertising for me and offering a reward for an absconding solicitor. You couldn't put in anywhere where I could send off a wire just to keep their minds easy, could you, captain?'

'I'm afraid not, but we'll turn and go back the moment things slacken up a bit. It doesn't sound like slackening yet, does it?' and we all ceased talking for a moment to listen to the wind howling over the skylight.

'I've a case on at the Courts on Monday,' said Dayrell.

'You won't be there,' said Lyle.

'Lamont, my boy, I shall charge you fees on the higher scale for a seven days' continuous interview. In fact, I'm not at all sure that an indictment wouldn't stand against you for kidnapping, with felonious intent to retard, obstruct and generally defeat the ends of justice.'

'All right, my boy, I shall send you in a little bill for board, lodging and carriage. But your indictment would not lie. On the contrary, I shall probably receive the thanks of the Courts for assisting a settlement by keeping you out of the way.'

'It's an interesting case,' he said, and he described it to us very fully and clearly, and made an excellent story out of it, and held our attention till it was time for Lyle and him to go on deck.

'Whatever will Vaurel do?' asked Denise, as soon as we were alone.

'I can only hope that when he finds us not there he will understand that something has detained us, and he will probably hang about in the boat for a time and then make his way home again, and wait till he hears from us.'

'It is very awkward,' she said, thinking possibly of other things besides Vaurel.

'But we can't help it, dearest,' I said, thinking only of herself. 'Meanwhile it is a great pleasure to us all to find you so good a sailor. I was miserable all last night thinking of what you must be suffering.'

'Really I didn't suffer much, Hugh. I had a fear sometimes that we were going down, but I knew that in your hands I was as safe as it was possible to be, and I prayed to the good God to take care of us all.'

Her eyes as she raised them to mine were as frank and trustful as a child's, and in my turn I thanked God from the bottom of my heart for committing her to my care, and for the faith that she had in me. How very sweet it was to sit there by her side, on the couch amidships at the forward end of the cabin because of the rolling, holding the slim, white, throbbing hand in mine and feeling that her sweet heart beat in tune with my own.

Our wooing had been of the shortest, but the elements had given us the chance of lengthening it out, and we made the most of the opportunity.

By rights, and if the gale had not intervened, we ought to have been married by this time, but on our own account we had no fault to find with the gale, and barring the discomfort of the thought of Vaurel's perplexity, we were very happy.

I bade her good-night at last, and when she had promised to pack herself into her bunk with the cushions as I had done in the morning, I kissed her blushing face till she broke from me again and swayed away into her room, and I went up on deck and joined Dayrell and Lyle over their pipes in the wheel-house.

I persuaded Lyle to turn in again for a couple of hours while I took the wheel with Dayrell to keep me company, for, with the possibility of the gale holding out for another day or two, it behoved us to husband our strength as much as possible. And so, with a

couple of lookouts in the bow with forcible instructions to keep their eyes well skinned, I took up my old duties again, and we went swinging along through the roaring darkness. But never before—though many times half a thousand souls had slept beneath my feet, dependent for their safety on my watchfulness—had I felt the weight of my trust as now, and I could pay no heed to Dayrell's chatter, so that he found me but a dull companion, and I was right glad when my spell was up and Lyle put in an appearance again.

Dayrell wanted to take a turn at the wheel, but I sharply forbade it.

'Why, man, I had it for an hour this morning, while you were asleep,' he said.

'I shouldn't have slept a wink if I'd known it,' I said. 'I've got a heavy stake below, old man, and I can't take any risks.'

'I wouldn't drown you for a shilling a head,' he said.

'Accidents might happen,' I said, 'and it would be too late to go for you when we were all at the bottom.'

The gale worried us along all the next day, which was Saturday, and we were all getting very sick of it, but it was not till mid-day on Sunday that the worst of it passed by and left us rolling in a very heavy sea.

The sun, which we had not seen since Thursday, broke wanly through the scud up above and gave Lyle the chance of taking an observation. We worked it out together and pricked off our position on the chart, and found that in the three days we had run close upon a thousand miles. We started the engines and turned at once and made a beeline for England.

'Well, I call that travelling,' said Dayrell, as exultantly as if it had all been due to his own personal exertions.

'Travelling the wrong way unfortunately,' I said, and I fell to thinking of Vaurel.

Here were we, seven hours past the appointed time, a good thousand miles from the appointed place, and

in spite of my confidence in him I could not help feeling somewhat anxious. So much might happen—could hardly help happening, it seemed to me—and if any one of the things that persisted in crawling about my brain did happen, all our plans respecting Gaston would be knocked on the head, and all our chances of getting at the truth through Lepard would be gone. I tried not to worry, saying to myself that Vaurel would come out top somehow, but the more I tried not to, the more I worried, and I could see that Denise was greatly troubled about the matter also.

‘This is Sunday, Hugh, and Prudent is waiting for us. Whatever will he do?’ she said, as she joined me for a walk on deck.

‘I can only hope he’ll go back home again, dearest, and wait there till we come. I can see heaps of difficulties in the way of his doing so. But I think he’ll manage it somehow.’

‘What is the very soonest we can get there?’ she asked.

‘It will take us three days good steaming to get back to Southampton, one day there, and a day and a half back. That brings us up to about Saturday morning.’

‘I’m troubled to know what is happening there,’ she said. ‘It may be all right, but it may be all wrong. If only we knew.’

CHAPTER XXII

A WIFE ON THE OCEAN WAVE

EVERY vestige of the storm had swept out of the sky before sunset, and the wind died away, though the sea was still heavy and sulky.

We were pacing the deck, enjoying the wide horizon and the brighter aspect of things, when one of the men suddenly sang out, 'Steamer astern, sir,' and Lyle came out with his glasses to inspect her. All we could see, however, was a plume of black smoke rising against the soft mother-of-pearl tints of the western sky.

'A steamer certainly,' said Lyle, 'probably one of the West Indian boats. We're about in their track. We shall see her again to-morrow most likely. Ah, there's dinner, and I'm about ready for it. It'll be quite a treat to eat without the fiddles on.'

Denise was in better spirits now that we were really on the way home, but every now and again she fell thoughtful, and I knew she was troubled about Vaurel and Lepard.

As for me, that plume of black smoke against the pale sky was constantly in my mind, but it was only when Denise had retired for the night that my thoughts came to a head and took definite shape. I had a talk with Lyle, and then a proper legal consultation with Dayrell, and then my mind was made up, and I saw my way out of one at least of our difficulties.

When Denise came on deck next morning we were going only half-speed, and the West Indiaman was toiling up about four miles astern.

'She's catching us,' said Denise, stopping to watch her.

'Yes, we're allowing her to.'

'Oh—why?'

'Because, my dear, she will help us out of one of our difficulties, and save us going to Southampton at all and so shorten the time it will take us to get to Vaurel.'

'How, Hugh?' she said, looking somewhat startled.

'As soon as she draws abreast of us, you and I and Dayrell will go on board of her and ask the captain to marry us.'

'Oh, Hugh!'

'Yes, dear, I know. But if you think it over for a minute or two you will see that it is the very best thing we can do.'

'But I have no clothes.'

'You look lovely in those.'

And so she did, in her blue dress and the reefer jacket and blue stocking-cap in which she had come on board at St Malo, but she looked down at herself and made a whimsical face.

'We will leave Dayrell on board if they will have him, and then we'll steam straight for St Nazaire and Vaurel. I know you are full of anxiety about him and the colonel.'

'Yes,' she said, and pondered deeply.

'I could get some things at Nantes,' she said presently.

'Of course, while we are coaling. I thought of that.'

The pretty brow was wrinkled, and the ripe red lips pressed tight with the weight of her thoughts, but at last she said consentingly, but not by any means effusively, which no doubt would have been too much to expect, 'Perhaps it is the best thing we can do.'

'I am sure of it. I have been thinking of it all night.'

'Are you quite sure the captain can marry us all right?'

'Quite sure. The captain of a ship can do pretty much anything he chooses.'

'But will it be all proper and legal?'

'Quite. I knew it was so, but to make quite sure I consulted Dayrell and Lyle before I decided to propose it to you, and they confirm me.'

'I *must* get a hat from somewhere,' she said.

'Don't,' I said. 'You look just lovely in that toque.'

'Think of being married in a sailor's stocking-cap,' she said.

'You can take it off during the ceremony.'

'Is it a passenger ship?'

'Yes, a West Indian liner.'

'And there will be women on board?'

'Most likely.'

'And they'll all be laughing at me.'

'Not a bit of it. You'll create such a sensation that they'll be all jealous, and all the men will be envying me.'

'But I don't want to create a sensation.'

'You can't help it, my dear, unless you hide your pretty head in a bag.'

'How soon will the steamer be up to us?'

'We can bring her up in half an hour by slowing down.'

'Give me a little longer and I'll go down and get ready,' and with another thoughtful look at the approaching vessel she went slowly down the companion.

'Bend on a signal that we want to speak to them, Lyle,' I said. 'Mademoiselle will be ready in an hour. And you might tell Barnes to drop the gig into the water, and let the boat's crew tog themselves out in their best. We may as well make as good a show as we can.'

'Mademoiselle makes no objections?' he asked with a smile.

'She sees with me that it is the best thing to be done, and so she consents. Dayrell, my boy, we shall miss your cheerful face as much as those troublesome clients in Lincoln's Inn must have done. Have you any packing to do?'

'Toothbrush, that's about all. I'm an ocean tramp.'

'You'll enjoy yourself on that West Indiaman.'

'I've enjoyed myself here,' he said heartily. 'I'd no expectation of such a high old time when I left London. I only hope there are no rewards out for me.'

'You search the papers carefully when you get home. Maybe you'll have a chance of some good fat libel suits, then you'll feel that your time hasn't been altogether wasted.'

'Humph! I'd sooner fight another man's libel

suit than my own any day,' and he also went down to make his preparations.

The steamer had acknowledged our signals, and as she drew nearer we saw her sides lined with expectant faces, while the officers on the bridge ogled us with their glasses and tried to make out what was wrong with us.

While she was still somewhat astern of us I went downstairs and tapped on Denise's door. She opened it at once, and her jewel of a face was all a-sparkle between tears and laughter.

I stepped inside and took the lovely rosy face between my hands and kissed her fervently.

'May God bless you, dearest,' I said, and meant it, with my whole heart and soul. 'And now let us go.'

As we came on deck the men gave a ringing cheer, and when Dayrell, before stepping down into the boat, handed each man a sovereign, as a wedding present, he explained, from him to them, they gave him another cheer for himself, and then as we pushed off they cheered and cheered again, and waved good luck with their caps, and we rowed out into the steamer's course. And presently she came up like a moving mountain, all a-bristle with white faces and staring eyes and craning necks, and dropped us a rope, and we drew in to where a gangway, leading up into a dark, square hole in her side, had been dropped for us.

We were received by an officer who eyed us with much curiosity. All that he said, however, was, 'Captain Rougvie is on the upper deck,' and led the way there at once.

We issued from the companion into the midst of a crowd of passengers with their faces all full of questions, and Captain Rougvie came forward to meet us.

He was a cheery old Scot, with kindly blue eyes and a grizzled brown face, and the homely inflections of his voice as soon as he opened his mouth were like music to my ear.

'Weel, sir? Your servant, ma'am, I thought 'twas all men ye were in the boat. And what can I do for ye? Is't coal ye want? I'm afraid we canna spare any. I'm sorry, but—'

'That's very good of you, captain, but it's not coal. Can we say a word to you in private?' for the inquisitive gaze of something over a hundred eyes was somewhat discomposing to Denise.

'Surely,' said the captain, and he led us along the deck to his cabin under the bridge.

'My name, Captain Rougvie,' I said, 'is Hugh Lamont, and the yacht yonder is mine. I come from Greenock—'

'I ken ye,' he said, 'I'm frae Port-Glasgow myself. Ye're the laddie that jumped into the sea after the auld Yankee and he left ye a mint o' money. I'm verra pleased to meet ye, Mr Lamont,' and he shook me warmly by the hand.

'This young lady is Mademoiselle des Comptes, of Cour-des-Comptes in Brittany.'

'Pleased to meet you, miss,' and he shook hands with Denise.

'My friend here is Mr George Dayrell of Lincoln's Inn, London. He is also my solicitor.'

'Pleased to meet you, sir, though I'm no keen on lawyers as a rule,' said the captain, and shook hands with Dayrell.

'What Mademoiselle and I have come to ask you to do for us, captain, is to marry us.'

'Dooms!' said Captain Rougvie in very great astonishment.

'We were crossing from St Malo to Southampton to be married there when the gale caught us and we had to run for it.'

'And can ye no go back now and be married?'

'We can, of course, but we don't want to, for this reason. We ought to have kept a most important appointment down near Nantes yesterday morning.'

Our not having done so may be upsetting plans on which very grave consequences depend, and every hour we are away may make matters worse. If you will do what we want we shall also ask you to give Mr Dayrell a passage to London, and then we shall go full steam for Nantes, and so we can save at least a couple of days. It is a matter of most extreme urgency. I should probably not be far wrong in saying it is a matter of life or death,' and I saw Dayrell prick up his ears.

'Weel, weel!' said the old man, regarding Denise with a fatherly eye, 'I've had bairths on board, and many a burying, but I never had a marriage. And it's your wish young leddy?'

'Yes, captain, if you will be so good.'

'I suppose I have the right?' he said, turning to Dayrell.

'Yes, you have the right, captain. And I have the special license we got for use in Southampton. But you won't need that. All you have to do is to make an entry in your log book and forward a copy of it to the Board of Trade, and Mr and Mrs Lamont will be tied up as tight as if the Archbishop of Canterbury had done it in Westminster Abbey. I'll see to all that for you.'

'Then I'll do it, Mr Lamont,' he said, and with a twinkle of pleasure in his eye, he added, 'It is na for your silver bright but for your winsome leddy. When'll it be?' he asked.

'Just as soon as you like, captain. We've been ready these three days past.'

'My! this'll set the ship agog. We've had a pretty tough time lately, broke a blade off our propeller two days ago. That's why we can't get on any faster. You won't mind the ladies coming to the wedding, miss?' he asked anxiously.

'Oh, no, I suppose not, captain,' she said, 'but it will have to be a very quiet wedding, for I haven't got any wedding garments, you see.'

The captain grew thoughtful. Whether he was trying to puzzle out why Denise was so ill-provided, or whether he was wondering how he could make good the deficiency, I could not be sure. It was the latter, however.

'We'll want just a wee bit time to get ready,' he said. 'Your boat can keep up with us, I suppose, Mr Lamont?'

'Easily, captain; she can do sixteen knots.'

'That's all right, then we'll be losing no time, and you not much, if you stop on board for a bit. We can't make above twelve. You'll stop with us, then, and I'll introduce you to some of my passengers. They'll be delighted at the idea of a wedding. We'll have it in the afternoon, and in the evening after dinner we'll have a dance on deck. I was just wanting something to waken things up. This is grand. I'm really very much obliged to you for coming and suggesting it.'

'It is we who are under very great obligations to you, captain,' I said, 'and any arrangements you make will please us.'

'Permit me, Ma'm'selle,' he said, and bent down and crooked his arm towards her with old-fashioned courtesy. Denise rose and took it, looking somewhat bewildered, and he led her out and along the deck, we following.

'I will put you in charge of Señora del Caltera,' said Captain Rougvie. 'She'll be delighted. She is the daughter of the governor of Porto Rico, just married herself, and going home on her wedding trip. She's been finding it gey dull, and this'll do her good.'

He led Denise along to a group of men who stood talking round a lady lying in a deck chair. The group opened as we came up and they all eyed us with much curiosity, the lady, who had very brilliant black eyes and a dark, vivacious face, regarding Denise much as

she might have inspected a new zoological specimen brought along for her inspection.

'Señora,' said the captain, 'we are going to have a wedding on board and this lady is the bride.'

'Ah, Señor Capitan,' she cried, jumping up with a clap of the hands and her eyes snapping, 'you are dear good man. If I had chosen I would not have ask anything better. My dear,' she said, taking Denise by both hands, with an assumption of motherliness which was infinitely amusing, for there could not have been many months between the girls' ages, 'I am sharm-ed. It has been ver dull. Manuel, a chair for the señorita,' she said quickly in Spanish, and one of the gentlemen, who was evidently her husband from the way she ordered him about, hastened to stretch a chair for Denise's use. 'Now, you others, run away while the señorita and I arrange things,' and in two minutes they were chattering away in French like a pair of magpies, while Dayrell and I were welcomed by the men, who had evidently found the voyage almost as dull as the señora herself.

There were several Spaniards among them, but the greater number were Englishmen; planters from the Islands, merchants, government officials, and so on, and they were all very pleasant and friendly.

As the matter had to be explained, I told them of our adventure and the reason for our coming on board, and they became still more hospitable, and as it seemed too bad that Lyle should be missing all the fun, I begged Captain Rougvie's permission to have him across also.

'Why, certainly, Mr Lamont, ask your skipper to come aboard at once. I'm quite sure he's a decent fellow or you wouldn't have him running your boat for you.'

So I called down to Barnes, who was towing alongside all this time, to go back to the yacht and beg

the captain to join us on board the liner, and he, Barnes, would take charge of the schooner.

The yacht slowed down to pick up the boat, and after an interval, which meant change of clothes and prepare-to-meet-ladies on the part of Lyle, we saw them steam ahead again and drop the boat in the steamer's course, and in another five minutes he was swinging along the deck towards us.

'Dooms!' cried Captain Rougvie, as his eyes lighted on him.

'Hello, Uncle Alec!' shouted Lyle, as he caught sight of him. 'Well, this is a treat. I'm right glad to see you. Hoo's a' wi' ye?'

'I'm weel, laddie, richt weel. An' yoursel'?'

'Never better. This is a treat. I'd have been over half an hour ago if I'd known it was you. You've changed ships.'

'Ay, ay! Old M'Tavish died and I'm commodore now.'

'Hugh!' came to my ears from the direction of the ladies, and I found Denise beckoning to me. 'Señora del Caltera desires to make your acquaintance.'

I bowed before the gleaming face, and murmured my gratification in French.

'I spik Inglish, sare,' she said. 'I am sharmed to make ze acquaintance of your beautiful vife.'

'That is very kind of you, I'm sure. Mademoiselle has been pining for the sight of a lady's face for three days past.'

'Ah, yes, I am zure!' she said, with a merry laugh and an arch look, 'but it is ver dull, ver triste, when ze sea is way op zere'—pointing half way up the sky—'and ze ship she roll ovaire and ovaire and everybody is seek, oh, so seek! ugh!' and she crumpled up her face in a grimace which expressed her feelings fully.

'And your friend?' she said, looking towards Dayrell. 'He is merry boy. I will know him also.'

I called Dayrell and presented him in due form.

'*Mais, mon Dieu,*' she said, turning to Denise, '*qu'est ce que c'est que ça—linkonsinsfeels?*'

Denise explained the point to her, and she was pleased to say that all the *avocats* she had met had been very nice men and very good company.

I told her that Dayrell would remain in the ship when we went away, and she said, 'Ah, zat is good. I am glad. I am tired of my hussband—*tiens!*' tapping Denise merrily on the arm, 'I should not said zat to you, *ma petite*. All same, we shall be goot friends. Mistaire Day-rel-Linkonsinsfeels. You will amuse me, is it not so?'

'I shall be delighted,' said Dayrell, and he evidently looked upon himself as in for an unusually good time, and I hoped he would not get into any mischief.

'Ah, lonch!' cried the señora, as the gong rang through the ship, 'we will go togezzer, *ma chérie*, and afterwards we will see,' and she nodded her smart little head many times very knowingly.

The time came round at last when I stood in the saloon, with Dayrell and Lyle by my side as best men, awaiting my bride.

The passengers clustered thick along the side seats, and the doorways were blocked with stewards and stewardesses and surreptitious passengers from the other end of the ship, all wide-eyed and expectant. Captain Rougvie stood in the space between the two centre tables before an improvised reading desk, over which were draped the Union Jack and the French tricolour. He looked distinctly nervous, and, when he wasn't looking anxiously towards the door of the saloon, he was glancing over the words of the marriage service so that they should run free and smooth when the time came, for, as he explained again afterwards, he had never had occasion to use it before, and it was not at all familiar to him. And, indeed, I may say that when the time did come he boggled

at some parts as though they astonished him, and got through with difficulty.

We stood waiting so long, in that state of nervous discomfort which a wait under such circumstances always accentuates, that if we had been ashore I might have feared that something untoward had happened to the bride's horses, or that her heart had failed her at the last minute, or that Young Lochinvar had unexpectedly come upon the scene. But of the two latter possibilities I had no fear, and here on board ship the first was out of question, and I could not understand what was keeping them. But that was because I did not understand the Señora del Caltera, as, indeed, how should I, seeing that I had not known her half a day.

It was all arranged by that vivacious young lady to satisfy her sense of the fitness of things and to give it due effect, and it was only when the captain in his nervousness was looking round for someone to send to inquire if they intended coming at all, that a buzz rose in the further passage, and swell, and burst out all round the room, and everybody stood up and craned their necks, and the little mobs in the other doorways exploded into the saloon by reason of those behind them who insisted on seeing.

And when I raised my eyes my heart leaped up into my throat and stuck there for a moment, till my eyes grew moist and dim, so that I could scarcely see the radiant vision that came slowly along between the tables towards me.

My wife has always been the loveliest woman in all the world to me, and in her stocking-cap and reefer coat no other woman could ever compare with her. But never tell me that clothes can't add to beauty.

Here was no stocking-cap and reefer jacket, but in their place a stately vision of shimmering white silk which trailed along the floor behind her and

added to her height, and billowing lace which enveloped her like a halo from head to foot, and hid and heightened all her beauty. A tiny spray of orange blossom gathered the lace on the shining coils of her hair and added the one touch of colour—until she drew near and raised her eyes to mine, and then, through the dimness of my own full eyes, I looked into hers, my love, my bride, and all the glories of heaven shone upon me.

I remember that I almost feared to take her hand; there was a sense of sacrilege in it, till she put it trustfully into mine, and we stood before the captain, who was almost as much taken aback as I was at this transformation scene.

The señora, I believe, stood behind us, mothering the bride, and coruscating with delight like a pin-wheel, I am sure, for that state lasted in her all the rest of the day.

But I did not see her then, nor anyone at all but Denise, and the honest, grizzled face of Captain Rougvie, and I have little recollection of the service, but I have George Dayrell's word for it that everything was done correctly and in order, and that we were tied as tight, as he said, as the Archbishop himself could have done it in Westminster Abbey.

Señora Fireworks behind had held herself in during the ceremony with difficulty, and when it was finished, and Captain Rougvie, beaming a speechless benediction, had shaken us both very heartily by the hand, and after the manners and customs of his country had given Denise a very hearty kiss which took her very much by surprise, we none of us knew exactly what to do next, for the position was unique for most of us. Dayrell indeed looked as if he knew what he would like to do; and the señora looked as though she feared the epidemic might spread her way, and so she solved the difficulty by going off with a whizz and a bang.

She sprang up, her dark eyes blazing with enjoyment, whirled her arms like the sails of a windmill, and cried, 'Heep, heep, rahl' at the top of her voice. The Anglo-Saxons in the crowd responded lustily, and then in a moment the second officer began,—

'For he's a jolly good fellow, for he's—'

But the third officer, who was a gallant and impressionable youth, shouted,—

'For she's a jolly good fellow—'

Then as this seemed somewhat inappropriate, the second officer scowled at his subordinate and went one better with,—

'For they're a jolly good cu-huple, which nobody can deny.'

And all the company joined in on that and sang it all through, cheers and all, and gave it with such a swing that the Spaniards' faces puckered at the noise, and we were all very jolly and happy.

Then the stewards came in masterfully and made it plain to us that they would prefer our room to our company, as they had business of importance on hand. So we all went up on deck and found it covered in, above and about, with canvas, while lanterns, plain and coloured, hung all round in profusion and transformed the work-a-day deck into fairyland.

And there Denise held a reception, for the señora was mistress of the ceremonies, and insisted on it, and I think every soul on board, and every man who could be spared from the *Clutha*, attended it. Even the stokers lurked momentarily in dark corners to peer at my peerless one with eyes that glanced and gleamed with a wickedness of which they had not, as yet at all events, been proved guilty, and as for the Jacks, they simply couldn't stop looking at her, but gazed and gazed with great round eyes and quietly working jaws as though she were a stage show, and certain it is that never in all their lives had they seen a show so well worth looking at.

Then at last the dinner gong rang out a new triumphant note and summoned us to the wedding feast. And it was a feast indeed, with a most miraculously-compounded wedding-cake which did the cook infinite credit, and he watched our appreciation of it from one of the doorways and retired satisfied with himself and with his handiwork and with us.

And so the merry feast progressed, with much popping of corks and much laughter, and finally with one or two brief speeches.

Captain Rougvie's was a model. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'I've buried lots of folks, but this is the first time I ever married anyone, and I am bound to say I like it better than the burials. If any of the rest of you feel that way inclined I'm the man for you. I will ask you all to fill your glasses and drink to the health of the bride and bridegroom, and we'll wish them all good luck and happiness.'

Somewhat similar doings on a smaller scale were toward in the fore-cabin and in the men's quarters, and the whole ship held high festival. I suspected Dayrell's open hand in these matters, for he had been going about with a knowing look on his face, and I had caught him openly conspiring with the chief of the butlers and the chief of the bakers—the head steward and the head cook—and he was slightly 'raised' at the thought of travelling for three days in company with the Señora del Caltera, upon whom he evidently thought he had made an impression.

When our own feast was about drawing to a close the head steward came along to the captain and whispered in his ear, and the captain nodded and smiled, and whispered in my wife's ear, and then between them they cut up two great platefuls of the wedding-cake, and he offered her his arm and led her proudly out of the saloon and into the fore-cabin, and everyone there, down to the very smallest, had a piece of cake and another good look at the sweetest

face they had ever seen. And then up on deck, where every Jack who wanted a piece of wedding-cake came up and took it off the plate where she held it, and they peeped shyly at her again as they did it, and touched their forelocks, and some of them said 'God bless you, miss,' and most of them bolted their bits of cake as if they were pills, and then replaced their quids, but some of the younger men carried them away carefully in their hands.

Then the ship's band played under the awning, not altogether untunefully, and what they lacked in skill they made up for in good-will, and some of the ladies danced, with the officers and the Spaniards and some of the planters and government men as partners. And presently Denise and the señora slipped away, and when my dear one came back dressed in her own things and the reefer coat and stocking-cap, I knew it was time to go.

But getting away was no easy matter, for everyone wanted to shake us by the hand and wish us good luck, and Captain Rougvie vowed that the obligation was all on his side and that he had never enjoyed himself so much, and George Dayrell gave us his blessing with paternal unction, and Señora del Caltera positively shed tears as she kissed Denise many times on both cheeks, and made her promise to call on her if ever she came to Madrid. And so at last the liner's syren bellowed to the yacht to stop for us, and the yacht replied with a shrill squeak, and we found ourselves dancing on the glinting dark water, with leviathan towering above and watching our passage with its rows of gleaming eyes.

A squeak from the yacht told them we had arrived, and then boom! went the liner's signal gun, and a flight of rockets brought us more good wishes. Then the big ship bellowed Goo-oo-oo-d-bye! Goo-oo-oo-oo-oo-d-bye! 'till she seemed to be in mortal agony and the very stars seemed to shudder at the sound,

and our shrill pipe, which must have sounded to them like a small boy blowing into a key, squeaked back 'Thanks! thanks! thanks! thanks! thanks!'

Then we turned our prow to the west and put on steam, and the long line of lights grew smaller and smaller, and became a yellow blur, and passed out of sight, and Denise and I stood watching them and our hearts were too full for speech.

CHAPTER XXIII

HOW WE SHIPPED THE DEVIL

I HAD now to explain my further plans to Andrew Lyle. Our first kidnapping venture had been entirely successful. The next was of a different kind, and might possibly entail pains and penalties, the extent of which I could not gauge, as I had not cared to enter into the matter with Dayrell at all. True, the colonel was a murderer and worse; for I count the man who conspires to ruin another's reputation, and condemns him to a life-long agony, worse by far than he who strikes down his victim and ends him. But even a murderer has his rights, and we had deprived him of those rights, and intended still to do so, in order to serve our own private ends. And although those ends might be for the righting of a great wrong we were doing an absolutely illegal thing, and we were doing it with our eyes wide open.

When the table was cleared next morning, I asked Lyle to come back after he had been up on deck to cast his eye around, then I dismissed the steward and told the captain the whole story, so far as it was known to us.

He was immensely interested, and upheld our position entirely.

'The man deserves no mercy, Mr Lamont,' he said warmly, 'and if I can help you wring the truth out of him I'm entirely at your service.'

'Where can we stow him? I don't want him anywhere here.'

'I'll see to that. He can have the engineer's cabin. Macpherson won't mind bunking forward under the circumstances. And when we've got him safe aboard where do you think of taking him to, Mr Lamont?' he asked.

'Well, I'm not quite decided. It really matters very little so long as we hold him without any risk of interference from the outside.'

I caught Denise's eyes fixed upon me with a strange wistful look in them.

'Your wish is granted, dearest, whatever it is,' I said, laying my hand on her slim white one with its new broad gold band which I had bought in London and which fitted marvellously.

'Could we—oh, could we,' she said, with a catch in her voice, 'could we go to New Caledonia?'

'We can go anywhere where there is water to float us,' said Lyle, stoutly.

'Then to New Caledonia we will go,' I said, and the diamond drops sparkled in my sweet wife's eyes once more.

'When Gaston is free and cleared of all stain, I shall have nothing left to wish for,' she said.

'Truth will out, Mrs Lamont,' said the captain, vehemently. 'It never can be hid in this world, at least,' he added cautiously, 'not often. And we'll have it out of this man if we have to—Well, anyhow, we'll get it,' he concluded, with a clenching of the strong brown hand on the table.

But my wife's heart and my own were heavy with anxiety as to what might have happened at Cour-des-Comptes or elsewhere, through our failure to be at the appointed place at the appointed time.

It was mid-day on Thursday when Croisic Point hove in sight, and an hour later the *Clutha* was moored alongside the coaling-shed at St Nazaire with orders to cram in every pound that could be got into her bunkers, in as short a time as possible, and Denise and I were jogging along towards Nantes as fast as a very slow train could take us.

Denise managed to purchase a flat straw hat in St Nazaire, and as the air of the land felt mild to our weather-beaten frames she was able to discard the reefer jacket also, and in great contentment she declared that she felt clothed like a Christian once more.

We must have been a godsend to the millinery shops of Nantes that afternoon, and the smiles and salaams which followed us right out on to the sidewalks testified to the high appreciation in which we were held. It did me good to watch the animation which my wife put into her purchasing, and the masterful way in which she had the whole of each establishment flying to her bidding within two minutes of entering its doors. But the charm of her manner bewitched them all, and they delighted in trying to please her. She knew exactly what she wanted, and her taste was never at fault, and the amount of business and money she got through in a very short time was, to a plain sailorman like myself, very surprising. At some of the shops she peremptorily ordered me to stand outside and wait while she dealt with the mysteries within, and on the first of such occasions I said,—

‘Poor little Señor Manuel! Now I begin to sympathise with him. I thought at the time he was something of a muff, but now I perceive he was simply a newly-married man.’

And Denise laughed merrily. ‘If I had let her I believe the señora would have given me half her trousseau, but then I should have missed all the pleasure of buying my things myself, and besides she was quite half an inch bigger round the waist than

I am and two inches shorter, so nothing would have fitted. Didn't you notice it in that dress I wore?'

'I noticed nothing except that you were the loveliest woman the world has ever seen.'

'Run over there across the street and buy me the nicest brushes they have, not too hard, that's a good boy. I shall not be long in here.'

But what with the multitude of our calls, and the number of return calls we had to make to see that orders and alterations had been properly carried out, the afternoon was soon gone, and after a hastily-enjoyed dinner at the Hotel de France, I found myself speeding back to St Nazaire with a somewhat exhausted but triumphant little wife and three trunks, full of feminine adornments, and in front of me the task of finding Vaurel, and a lurking fear as to how matters might be with him when I did find him.

I convoyed my wife and her spoils on board the yacht, commended her to Lyle's most careful keeping, and arranged with him to be off the mouth of the Vilaine by six o'clock next morning, and then just managed to catch a train for Redon, and dropped off at Bessancy station shortly after nine o'clock.

The night air was cool and there was a fine rain falling, but I turned up my coat collar and walked briskly along the high road towards Cour-des-Comptes.

I did not meet a soul all the way, and when at last I turned into the château grounds and the house stood below me, all dark and silent, my anxieties were at a fine point, for a few minutes more would tell me how the land lay.

As I drew near, however, a faint sound of music caught my ear, and leaving the front of the house I went quietly along to the terrace. The music was softer here, and the darkness was ribbed with narrow lines of light which streamed through the Venetian shutters of the drawing-room, and across the yellow bars the rain fell like drops of liquid silver.

I stole close up and smiled, in spite of my anxious mind, at sight of Hortense, who I could only see in sections like parts of a child's puzzle, strumming away, with the painful pertinacity of a beginner, at '*Parlant pour la Syrie.*'

The poor old piano jangled and quavered under the torture, and I pitied it, remembering the slim white fingers slipping delicately over its yellow keys the last time I heard it played.

Then I stole away and struck across the grass and through the dripping woods straight for Vaurel's house, and the only sound was the dismal plashing of the weir. I struck the path above the house and stepped cautiously downwards, for the wet leaves on the wet soil were slippery.

The little house was all dark and there was no sound from it, but my nose caught a faint fragrant whiff of wood smoke which doubtless the rain bore down. I turned the corner cautiously, and in an instant, with nothing more than a preliminary snuffle, a pair of fiercely-scrabbling paws were clawing their way up my chest, and a great blunt muzzle was working with eager snorts to fasten on to my throat.

'Boulot!' I gasped, and he dropped like a sack and grovelled abjectly at my feet, too much ashamed of himself even to greet me.

I bent and patted him and he recovered sufficiently to rear himself up against the door to carry the good news to his master.

'*Holà!*' cried Vaurel from inside, 'who is that?'

'It is I, Vaurel—Lamont.'

'*Dieu de Dieu!*' and I heard the bed creak as he sprang up. 'At last!'

He unbolted the door and, as I entered, thrust a piece of paper among the ashes and lighted a candle.

'I began to think you had got drowned, monsieur, but I am mighty glad to see you.'

'We got blown out to sea in the gale and only

got back to St Nazaire to-day. I came on at once. Where is—?’

‘He’s all right. He’s under there’—pointing with his foot to the other bed. ‘But I’ve been living on a powder magazine ever since I got back. No one knows I’m here but Louis Vard, and I’m aching to get away. When can we go, monsieur?’

‘Now, at once, the sooner the better. The ship will be at the river mouth by six o’clock. Where’s the boat?’

‘Sunk in the river where it was before. I had the devil’s own job getting back without being seen.’

‘I’m sure of it, Vaurel. I’m thankful to find you safe here, and him still with you. I’ve been fancying all kinds of things happening to you both.’

‘Well, they very nearly did, all of them, but I’ll tell you later. We must get to work at once, and as you say, monsieur, the sooner we’re away the better.’

‘Well, what’s to be done first?’

‘We’ll have to carry him through the woods to the boat. We can empty her when we get there, then in and away. It’ll be pretty damp, but we can’t help that.’

‘It’s damp anyhow. Have you any things to take with you?’

‘They’re all ready,’ he said, kicking an old carpet bag.

‘How will we carry him?’

‘Stretcher, as we did the other.’

He got a couple of long poles, of which there were always a number lying about outside, draped a blanket between them, and secured it with half-a-dozen nails, and laid a dozen empty sacks on top.

‘We had the detectives round the very night I left,’ he said, as he worked; ‘they nosed all over the château and all round here. Good thing we were away, and that I’d left everything straight and clean up yonder, and, better still, they’d gone before I got back. *Mon Dieu*, getting back was a devil of a time!’

When we were ready, Vaurel hauled Lepard out from under the bed, all ready trussed and gagged,

and we placed him on the litter. He placed the carpet bag under his knees, stamped out the handful of smouldering ashes, and we took up the poles, Vaurel slinging his in the loops of a rope round his neck, and we passed out into the night.

He closed and locked the door, and we turned up the slippery path.

We had not gone a dozen yards, however, Boulot sneezing disgustedly at our heels, and still somewhat ashamed of himself for making such a mistake, when a voice just above us in the darkness said, '*Holà, messieurs!* and what have you got there?'

Lepard came to the ground with a bump as Vaurel loosed one end of his sling and dashed upwards at the speaker, and in a moment the two of them were rolling over and over among the wet leaves and bushes.

'Tie your handkerchief over his mouth,' panted Vaurel.

He was lying on top of the other by this time, squeezing all the breath he could out of him. I tied a couple of knots in my handkerchief, and held the stranger's wriggling head between my knees, but his mouth was closed tight and I could not get the gag in. Vaurel raised himself, and came down on him with a plump which made him gasp. I slipped the gag in and tied it tight behind his neck.

'Now his feet,' panted Vaurel.

I got the rope he had been using for the litter, and tied the man's feet.

'To the house,' said Vaurel, and we each took an arm and dragged him down the path, his bound heels making a big furrow in the soft earth.

Vaurel unlocked the door again, sought out some more rope, and we lashed him up like a mummy, laid him on the bed and locked him in, and then turned back up the path to our original enterprise.

'What will become of him and who is he?' I said, as we replaced Lepard and the sacks on the litter.

'Some dirty detective, I suppose,' said Vaurel, 'not a Cour-des-Comptes man anyhow. I've thought several times someone was about. That's why I left Boulot outside. I thought at first it was Juliot. Glad it wasn't. We might get into trouble for handling a *gendarme* like that. We can say we thought this pig was a burglar.'

'And what will become of him?'

'Louis Vard may come down in a day or two. He brought me victuals twice this week, but it's been short commons, as he couldn't come often for fear of being seen.'

'If we get down the river all right we might send Louis a telegram from Redon or St Nazaire telling him to go to your house.'

'We can do that. For myself, I should let him starve a bit. Now, monsieur, there's the big house right before us. We bear round to the right, and the boat is in the little bend where it was before.'

We felt our way along the river bank, stumbling and sprawling.

'It should be somewhere about here,' said Vaurel, and tripped over the rope and went headlong, letting the prisoner down once more with a bump.

'*Sacré nom de chien!*' he growled, 'there you are. *Eh, b'en!* better so than not at all. Now, monsieur, help me haul her in and we'll get the water out of her.'

We drew her in by the rope as far as we could, and then waded out and hauled her up the sedgy bank inch by inch with the water running out astern, till I was able to get into her and bale her with my two hands, splashing out the water in sheets. Then we hauled her ashore, and turned her over on her side and let her drain.

'Any oars?' I asked.

'Lashed under the thwarts.'

In another ten minutes we were running down the river in mid-stream, both of us soaked to the skin,

and in the best of spirits at the prosperous start we had made. Lepard lay in the bottom of the boat, carefully covered with the blanket and empty sacks. Boulot sat on top of the sacks and shivered abjectly at the proximity of the hated water, and when the dawn came I saw his eyes rolling in horror to find how very near it was.

We spoke little on the journey, but one time Vaurel sprang up with a big oath and a sounding slap of his hand against his leg.

'*Sapristi, sacristi, sacré nom de chien!*' he said. 'I've left the carpet bag behind with all my things,' and he looked half inclined to get out and go back.

'Too late now, my friend. Louis Vard will find them and take care of them, and we'll buy all you want at St Nazaire.'

'It was that stupid fool coming and interfering,' he said, and relapsed into gloomy silence over his loss.

We passed several villages lying back from the river bank, but they were all fast asleep and no one troubled us. I took the sculls for the sake of exercise and warmth, and it was just five o'clock when we caught the first swell of the sea, and a quarter of an hour later we were past the outreaching arms of the land, and the *Clutha* came stealing round a point to the south and we headed straight for her.

CHAPTER XXIV

OVER THE SEAS

As the blunt nose of our boat rubbed gently up against the schooner's shining side the sailors gazed down wonderingly at this strange carry-on, and evidently could make neither head nor tail of it.

The colonel was quickly hoisted in and carried

down to Macpherson's cabin. He was looking very much the worse for wear, and his eyes gleamed hatred and malice and cursed us with the curses which he would not allow his lips to utter. But the morning sun caused them to blink, which somewhat weakened the effect. Denise had retired to the saloon as soon as she saw that our voyage had been prosperous, and there she awaited us.

The château boat was turned adrift and the schooner's nose pointed out to sea, and then I said to Vaurel,—

‘We'll both be the better of a change of clothes and something to eat and drink. Come along down below my friend, and I'll see how I can fit you out.’

Boulot lumbered down the companion in front of us, and from his excited snuffles I knew that he was paying his respects to Denise.

She stood waiting for us in the saloon and came forward and kissed me warmly on both cheeks, and then turned to greet Vaurel with welcoming hands and her face alight with pleasure at the sight of him.

He stopped short in wide-eyed astonishment.

‘*Comment?* Ma'm'selle?’ he gasped.

‘But yes, Prudent, it is really me.’

He looked from one to the other of us, not understanding.

‘But no longer Ma'm'selle, my friend,’ I said. ‘Permit me to introduce you to my wife. Madame Lamont, this is Monsieur Prudent Vaurel, the faithfullest and best of friends.’

‘And I knew him before I had ever set eyes on you, my husband,’ she said merrily, and wrung his big hand in both hers.

‘*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*’ he said, still slightly dazed with surprise. ‘And you never said a word of it, monsieur. Well, I could not have wished anything better for Ma'm'selle. He is a true man, Ma'm'selle, and a brave one.’

'*Merci!*' we said together, and laughed at our unanimity.

'Monsieur has made very good use of his time,' said Vaurel, slyly.

'I am quite of that opinion, my friend,' I said. 'And now let us to table, and you'll give us all your news.'

He was somewhat shy at first at sitting down to table with 'Ma'm'selle,' but Denise very soon put him at his ease.

'We did not get away a minute too soon that first time, monsieur,' he said. 'There was a strange man came to the village that same night, and Louis Vard swore he was a detective. He nosed around everywhere, and questioned everyone, and next day he insisted on going over the château, but he found nothing, for all his nose was so sharp. They are hunting for him high and low, I expect, and I would not be a bit surprised if the whole thing comes out without our doing another thing. It all depends on what his papers show, and if they can lay hands on them. When they can't find him they'll hunt for the papers, and if they are to be found, pff—!' and he snapped his fingers to show what value he put on the colonel if his papers were discovered and proved incriminatory. 'And where are we going now, monsieur?' he asked.

'We are going to St Nazaire first to send off a telegram to Louis Vard, and get you some clothes and then we sail for New Caledonia, Prudent.'

'*Bien!*' he said, 'Boulot and I will go too. I have always thought I would like to go—as a visitor. What do you say, my little Boulot?'

Boulot sneezed a hearty assent, and graciously accepted from Denise's fingers the thigh bone of a fowl which he bolted at two crunches, and then wrinkled up his brows and licked his lips and blinked plaintively for more—plenty more—of the same kind. At the same time he glanced sheepishly at me out of the corners of his eyes, as much as to say, 'Say, old

fellow, don't you go and give me away. It was a silly mistake to make, I confess, but, you see, it was dark, and I'd been asleep, and it shan't occur again.'

Vaurel's further account of matters at Cour-des-Comptes since I left contained nothing of importance. He had tended the prisoner as usual, and twice a day had given him the chance of speaking, but the colonel had maintained the same rigid silence, and spoke no word except to Boulot, whom he cursed from time to time into wildest paroxysms of fury. After satisfying themselves as to the facts of Roussel's death, the authorities had him buried in the graveyard at Bessancy. Louis Vard and Jeanne Thibaud were well and hearty, and Hortense and her mother had gone back to the château the day after Vaurel left on his first expedition.

'I cleaned out the prisoner's cell before I left,' said Vaurel. 'I had asked Louis Vard to come down and give me a hand and he nearly had a fit when he saw the colonel, but when I explained matters to him he wanted to twist his neck. We tied him up and gagged him and put him on a couch in the salon with Boulot to look after him, and then we set to work and straightened matters up all round, and left everything nice and tidy. But, *mon Dieu!* what a job it was getting back up that river. Coming down was easy enough, but going back against stream—it was killing work. I waited in the bay here all day, hoping every minute to see you, and we had a pretty bad time of it, for it was rough here too. When it got dark I sculled back into the mouth of the river and as far up as I could get, and then I went ashore and tied a rope round my waist and towed the boat along, and it was pretty rough travelling, I can tell you, for me at all events. For the colonel it was easy enough. He went along like a prince and I his galley slave. However, I swore a good deal and got some bread at a cottage near the river and we got on bit by bit. At places where there were bends and back currents I could

scull a bit, but it was mostly towing, and it took me till the next night to get in sight of the château again. Then I had to hide the boat and leave Boulot in charge while I got Louis Vard to help. I lay in wait for him as he came home from the station, and we carried the colonel up to my house. *Voilà tout! Dieu de Dieu, Ma'm'selle! Madame, I mean,* he broke out again, beaming all over his face, 'but it does my eyes good to see you looking so well and happy.'

'There is only one thing I want, Prudent, to make me perfectly happy, and that is—'

'Monsieur Gaston,' he broke in, and you shall have him, Ma'm'selle. You shall have him back as sure as I sit here.'

We put in to St Nazaire as being the safer place from which to telegraph to Louis Vard, but only stopped there long enough for Vaurel and myself to go ashore and send off the telegram, and buy such things as Vaurel needed, and then we turned the *Clutha's* nose to the west and felt our voyage fairly begun.

During the morning I paid a visit to the colonel. He had been freed from his bonds and was lying in his bunk, very unhappy at the motion of the vessel, for we were crossing the Bay of Biscay, and the *Clutha* was showing us what she could do under the circumstances.

'Colonel Lepard,' I said, 'I have come to offer you one last chance. We are bound for New Caledonia to procure the release of Gaston des Comptes. There is still time for you to put us in possession of all the facts of the case. If you do so, I will put you ashore—as soon as I have found them correct—in Spain or England or on the African coast. If you won't speak you go with us and we shall deal with you as seems best to us.'

I waited, but he would not speak. His back was towards me and I saw him shudder as the yacht gave a sickening roll.

‘Very well, then, you must take the consequences,’ I said, and left him to his agonies.

The waves of Biscay played havoc with our new arrivals. Vaurel was turned many times inside out and expressed new and voluble surprise on each occasion, but presently found his legs and took a new lease of life. Boulot curled himself into a tight coil in a corner of the saloon, and refused all offers of food, and declined even to be spoken to till his stomach had adjusted itself to the motion of the ship. Then he got up and balanced himself tentatively on his bandy legs, with his chin almost on the floor, tottered up on deck, sneezed many times at the nip of the keen salt air, and growled out a curse whenever a white top came lashing over on to the deck. Then he went downstairs again and gently intimated to the steward that he was hungry, and that in default of legitimate satisfaction of his wants he would help himself, and looked meaningly at the calves of the steward’s trousers. Then when he had fared sumptuously he went on deck again and was immediately very sick, and after that he felt better.

CHAPTER XXV

HALF ROUND THE WORLD

ONCE out of the troublesome bay we slipped rapidly down the Spanish coast and caught the North-East Trades soon after passing Teneriffe. Then we shut off steam and hoisted our wings and found the *Clutha*’s flight before the wind more to the liking of some of our passengers than the steaming had been.

Denise was by this time a seasoned sailor, and never had man a more delightful companion; and Vaurel and Boulot, as soon as they had found their sea legs, took life very comfortably. It took Vaurel, indeed,

many days to overcome his shyness at associating so intimately with the lady of the château, but this wore off by degrees before 'Ma'm'selle's' grateful appreciation of all he had done for her and her house, and he settled down to the position of cabin passenger with considerable enjoyment.

Each day I visited the colonel, but never once got a word from him. Even when he thought he was at the point of death from sea sickness the black jaw bristled with defiance, and the heavy shoulders humped themselves sulkily against me. And I must confess that as the days passed I came to have something akin to a lurking admiration for this dogged steadfastness of purpose which kept the door tight locked upon him when a dozen words would have set him free. I wished most devoutly that his stubborn pride would give way and let him speak, so that we might release him to dree his weird as Providence might permit, for his being there was as bad as having a corpse on board, and our thoughts could never get far away from him. The close confinement on shore and his sufferings at sea had told on him strongly, but he showed a spirit worthy of a better man and a better cause.

At first the discussions of the men as to who the colonel was and why he was thus kept prisoner were endless, and it seemed to me advisable at last to put a stop to all the talk by telling them the simple truth.

I was pacing the deck one night after Denise had gone to bed, when, as I passed the forward companion which led to the men's quarters, a lively disputation on the subject of the colonel caught my ear.

'He's the gal's father, I tell you,' said one gruff voice, 'an' he wouldn't say yes, so they've tuk him along.'

'Her husband, maybe,' suggested another.

'Not a bit of it,' said the first. 'Mr Lamont's a gentleman and he don't run away with no other man's wife, you bet. Why, it was him as got all that money

for fishin' out a Yankee millionaire what tumbled overboard from the Cunarder. You remember, don't you? There was a lot o' talk about it at the time. My eyes! I wisht I'd had the chance. Some folks has luck. He was the first orficer on the *Servia*, and 'ere 'e is a-sailin' 'is own yacht and takin' along the handsomest girl ever I set eyes on. It's her father, you bet, and he wouldn't say yes, so they've just tuk 'im along.'

'Are they right married?' asked another.

'In course they are. Why, you was there on the West Indiaman and seed it all with your own eyes. An' a bonny sight she was too. I never seed anything prettier in this world yet.'

'It may be all right what you're a-telling us, Jim Barrett, but your on'y supposin' it. You don't know any more than the rest of us.'

'Oh, all right, if you know better—'

'I'm not saying, mind you, but what you say may be right, but what I says is that you don't know for sure any more than the rest of us, and anyhow it's a darned rummy start to bring a man aboard like that, and keep him locked up in his cabin, and never let no one see him, 'cept that 'airy Frenchman and the boss.'

'Well, you'll find out I'm right. He's Mrs Lamont's father, and he'd shut 'er up in a convent, so's Mr Lamont couldn' get at 'er. Then Mr Lamont he 'ooks 'er out o' the convent and marries her out of hand, an' the old man wouldn' say yes so they've brung 'im along, and they'll keep 'im tight till 'e does say yes, and then they'll let 'im go.'

'What's it matter 'im not sayin' yes so long's they're married straight and proper?' said another.

'Ah, that's just where it is. In France you can't git married proper unless yer father an' yer mother says yes, and so when the old man—'

'But they was married on the West Indiman, you said. Bein' married on a West Indiman ain't bein' married in France.'

'Silly—the gal's French, ain't she? And she couldn't git married proper unless her father said yes, and so they're hold'n 'im tight till he says it, then off he goes and mercy bang and au revore.'

'Ah, I thought as how they weren't married proper,' said the former doubting Thomas.

'Well, they will be soon as the old man says the word, and anyhow it's his fault, not theirs.'

'What I says,' said another, 'is—has the cap'n of a ship the right to marry people right?'

'Better arsk 'im next time you're on one.'

'Course he has,' said Jim. 'He's the right to string you up, hasn't he? and he's the right to bury you, hasn't he? Well, then, it stands to reason he's the right to marry you too if he wants to.'

'I d'n know,' said persevering Thomas; 'stringin' up and buryin' of a man, why, that makes an end of 'im, but marryin' of a man's diff'rent and may lead to consekences—'

'There's many a man'd ha bin glad if he'd bin strung up and buried afore he got married,' growled another, who had evidently had experiences.

Next day I caught our young friend Barrett alone, and asked him, 'What do the men think of our friend down below, Jim?'

'Who's that, sir?' he asked, colouring up.

'The Frenchman we keep locked up in Mr Macpherson's cabin.'

'Aw, um, well, sir,' he said, shuffling about uneasily, 'they do say he's Mrs Lamont's father.'

'Dear me! and why do they suppose we treat him in that way?'

'Well, sir,' and he looked round both sides of me, but I stood square in front and left him no means of escape, 'they do say, sir, that the old gentleman won't say yes to your marryin' the young lady, and you're a-going to keep him tight till he does.'

I laughed out, which disconcerted him greatly.

'Well now, Jim, I'm going to tell you the actual facts. It's no good having a mystery when there's no need for it. The man down below is a French officer. By fraud and trickery he caused Mrs Lamont's only brother to be transported to New Caledonia for treason and betrayal of War Office secrets. We know the facts, but cannot get hold of the proofs except through this man. Each day I have offered him his liberty if he will tell what he knows, but so far he will not speak. Until he does I hold him prisoner.'

'I'd jolly well screw his damned neck round, beggin' your pardon, sir.'

'I feel like that often enough, Jim. But you see I want him to speak, and if his neck was screwed round he couldn't speak.'

'That's so, sir. And may I tell the rest all about it, sir? They do talk now and again, and it puzzles 'em more'n a bit.'

'Yes, tell them by all means.'

I would have liked very much to hear Jim's discourse that night, but that could not be, and I had to leave our characters in his hands, believing that he would do us full justice.

The days passed pleasantly and restfully, for us, at all events, who were free to revel in the fresh salt air and the glorious sunshine. For the prisoner below they must have been infinitely long and wearisome.

Never surely was there sweeter companion than Denise, my wife. Each day discovered fresh charms in her, new and delightful lights in her character, and depths of tenderness of sincerity which made me bless, again and again, the day on which I walked into the Salon and fell over head and ears in love with her portrait.

Now that we were really on our way to Gaston, whatever the issue of our adventure might be, her spirits were of the brightest, and her own vivid enjoyment of life irradiated a new joy of living on all

around her. The men fairly worshipped her, and whenever she was on deck their eyes turned to her as naturally as flowers turn to the sun, and if by chance she spoke to one of them he was a proud man for the rest of the day. They made up little jobs and errands that brought them within earshot of her lively chatter, and lingered long over them, and got grumbled at by their fellows for taking more than their fair share of enjoyment.

Lyle was, I could see, more than half in love with her himself, though his repressive Scotch nature kept his feelings hidden from any but a brother Scot.

As for Prudent Vaurel, he would have let her walk upon him or use him for a footstool at any hour of the day. Since she grew out of short frocks he had never seen her as she was now. For she was very happy both in the present and in her hopes of the future, and she saw no necessity for concealing it.

Even Boulot showed his enjoyment of her presence, and on the days that were fine and sunny, when the *Clutha* kept a fairly even keel and the objectionable water outside did not make itself too obtrusive, he would patrol the deck for a while by way of keeping himself fit, with the semblance of a solemn smile on his bunched-up face. Then he would settle himself comfortably on a bit of her skirt, and go off to sleep and dream dreams which set him whimpering with happiness—dreams maybe of strangling endless collies, and taking murderers galore by the throat—and sometimes he would bark himself awake and find us all laughing at him, and then he would look foolish and with a snuffle of disgust he would curl himself up and go to sleep again, but always on the edge of Denise's skirts.

There was not a man in fact on board who would not willingly have given his life for her at a moment's notice, except indeed that one down below in Mac-

pherson's cabin, and him I had come to look upon no longer as a man but as a dumb devil.

Soon after leaving the Cape Verde Islands we had to take to steam again. We made a most prosperous and enjoyable run across the Atlantic and struck the Brazilian coast just twelve days later, and then jogged quietly along, from Pernambuco to Bahia, from Bahia to Rio, from Rio to Buenos Ayres, encountering nothing but good weather till we came to round Cape Horn, and there we got it stiff and strong and bitterly cold, with mist and snow and blinding storms of sleet and rain.

However, we set our teeth to it, and groped and fought night and day, till at last we won through to the softer weather of the Pacific, and rejoiced once more in an even keel and the comfort of the sunshine.

We ran up the coast to Valparaíso, crammed our bunkers with every ounce of coal they could carry, and set off, under sail again, in the best of spirits for our eight thousand miles' flight across the great waste of waters to the lovely further islands.

And all things prospered with us, and the men said it was because of the beauty and sweetness of the lady of the ship, and Denise was as happy as the days were long—wanting only one thing, and that we were striving to attain as fast as the winds would carry us. For both she and Vaurel were buoyed up with the sure and certain belief that our arrival in Noumea would, in some way or other, accomplish the release of Gaston, though how this was to be brought about they could neither of them say. Vaurel went even further, in moments of extreme exuberance, and expressed the belief that when we arrived we should find him already released and on the way home.

I fostered all their hopes, for it was better to be hopeful and happy than despondent and sad. But in my own mind, while hope was never absent, I could not attain to the assurance that they possessed,

and I wondered much and often what the end of it all would be, and prayed that it might be such as would satisfy to the full the desire of that sweet soul which was dearer to me than my own.

CHAPTER XXVI

BY THE FRONT DOOR ONLY

VAUREL and I and the captain took counsel together, over many pipes in the night watches, as to the plan to be followed when we reached New Caledonia.

It was quite evident that Lepard would die speechless sooner than disclose what we wanted so much to learn, and what to do with him I was somewhat at a loss to know.

Vaurel's plan was a bold one.

'Put me quietly ashore somewhere handy,' said he, 'and I'll get into the settlement and find out where Monsieur Gaston is. Then, if it is possible, we will carry Monsieur le Colonel in some night and leave him there, and bring Monsieur Gaston away with us. That's the idea. Exchange the right man for the wrong one.'

'There is only one difficulty, Vaurel,' I said, 'and that is, that Monsieur Gaston would not come.'

'Who knows, monsieur? Imprisonment tells on any man's spirit, whether he's innocent or not, and if it be long enough and strong enough, he breaks. They say they treat them pretty well out there. But I know if I was in there, and knew that my sister was waiting outside for me, I'd come out like a shot if the chance offered. Still,' he said, with a half doubtful shake of the head, 'there's no knowing. We're not all built the same way.'

'He won't come,' I said, 'but we can give him the chance.'

I discussed the matter with Denise also, and disclosed Vaurel's plan to her. But she said decisively, 'He will not come,' and then, more slowly, 'And I do not think I would wish him to come, though I hunger for the sight of him. Perhaps I could see him, Hugh, even though he will not come away with us?'

'Surely we could manage that much. But I hope in some way we can do more.'

'Oh, we shall, I am sure we shall. I feel it. We shall take him back with us, and he will come back with us in honour. I know it, though I can't see how it's going to come about.'

But she believed it thoroughly, and the belief kept her spirits at high pitch, and made life bright for her, and so for us.

Week after week we slipped along through those quiet waters, under skies of wonderful flawless blue, till the long smooth rollers and the infinite solitudes had come to be a part of our lives. And when at last we made the Australs, and thence wove a devious course among the myriad lovely islands scattered like emeralds about those seas, the sight of them and the delight of them were things which would remain with all of us as long as life lasted.

And also, at last, one bright morning, Captain Lyle pointed to a faint blue blur on the lift of the water-line in front, and told us that was New Caledonia, and the feeling that all our hopes were coming to the point worked us up into such a state of excitement that speech was almost impossible, and eating, beyond the absolutely necessary minimum, quite out of the question.

According to our plans, we kept a wide offing round the south of the island and crept up the further side, keeping the peaks in view, and no more. There was always of course the chance of our coming across

some patrol gunboat, but we saw nothing of the kind, and as soon as night drew on, we ran in under steam, and stole down the western coast with every light hidden, till, in the distance, over a promontory, a lightening of the darkness up above told us that Noumea lay just beyond.

Then the boat was lowered, and Vaurel and I got into it with four men to row.

We crept in cautiously, and took our chances of the surf and got safely ashore. Vaurel tumbled out, wrung my hand in silence, and disappeared into the darkness.

We were to return the following night to the same spot as nearly as we could strike it, and wait there till he came.

It was a venture full of risks. In a penal settlement a strange face was almost sure to excite suspicion and cause inquiry, and Vaurel's eyes were quite open to the possibility of it all ending in an addition of one to the colony without any advancement of our ends. We had reason to believe, however, that ordinary prison rules were not very much enforced, and that the prisoners were left very largely to themselves. He took with him a supply of food for himself, and tobacco enough to purchase a considerable amount of goodwill.

As soon as he was ashore, we pulled quietly back to the schooner, and assured the waiting ones there that he had made a good start on his adventure. Then the yacht crept out to sea again, and we spent the next day in a state of suspense that was trying to nerves and tempers, and subversive of anything more than the most elementary of social intercourse.

Denise, who felt the strain more than any of us perhaps, kept to her room for the greater part of the day. Boulot perambulated the ship doggedly in search of his master, and snuffled discontentedly at not finding him. Lyle raked the horizon all day long for obtrusive cruisers, but found none and was satisfied.

That was as long a day as ever I spent, and there

was nothing to shorten it. Our thoughts were across the water there with Vaurel, and our anxiety as to his welfare was great.

I took in to Denise the daintiest dishes the cook could concoct, but she could eat nothing. To please me, she trifled with morsels, but ate no more than a sparrow.

'You will take me with you to-night, Hugh?' she asked.

'Not to-night, dearest. We must hear first what Vaurel has found out. Many things might have happened, you know. Everything might have come out in Paris, and Gaston might be on his way home.'

'Or he might be dead,' she said gloomily, yielding for a moment to the pressure of her anxieties.

'We must just hope for the best,' I said, finding few words with which to comfort her, for, in truth, the possibility of Gaston's death seemed to me as likely as any.

'You will come back and tell me as quickly as possible?' she said.

'Just as quickly as the boat can bring me.'

As night drew on, we crept in towards the land again, and then, in pursuance of our plans, the boat was lowered, and, no doubt to his intense surprise, Colonel Lepard, bound and gagged, was handed down into it, and we started for the shore.

What the colonel imagined we were going to do with him I cannot tell, but his eyes, as I saw him carried up on deck, were full of apprehension. He probably thought we were sick of him and were going to make an end of him.

We struck the shore as near the spot where we had landed Vaurel as we could hit it, but we had not been there five minutes when a subdued 'Hist!' a little way down the beach announced him. We replied, and he stole quietly in among us.

'Is he there?' I asked in a whisper.

'Yes, monsieur, he is there, but I have not spoken

to him. I thought it best not to make two bites at the matter, and your words will weigh more with him than mine. He mixes very little with the others, and has a hut apart. It is at this end, just over the bluff there. We can get to him without difficulty. Have you the colonel there, monsieur?

'He is in the boat.'

'You can bring him a good half mile nearer. A patrol travels along the road there now and again, but they make noise enough and there is no difficulty in avoiding them. Shall we take him with us? Then if Monsieur Gaston agrees we can make the exchange at once and get away.'

'We will take him as near to the place as we can, but he had better remain in the boat till we have spoken with Gaston. I doubt very much if he will consent.'

'We can only try.'

I ordered the men to row quietly along the shore till they heard our signal to come in, then Vaurel and I walked along towards the glimmer over the rise in front.

'And is he well, Vaurel, and how does he stand it?'

'As one would expect, monsieur. His heart, they say, is almost broken, and he scarcely ever speaks to any of them.'

'Had you any trouble in getting in?'

'None at all. The guards are at the other end towards the town. There is nowhere for them to go to up this way, and if they escape to the hills the natives would make an end of them. *Tiens!* here comes the patrol. I hope the boat will hear them.'

The boat heard and lay as quiet as we lay in the bushes, and the patrol, marching anyhow, tramped noisily past.

'They will be back in half an hour or so,' said Vaurel; 'we can do nothing till they have gone, then we have a clear field.'

So we lay and waited patiently till they came noisily back again, and as soon as they were out of hearing we climbed back into the road and set out again towards the light overhead.

Then we left the path and took to the broken ground by the sea, stumbling along in the dark as best we could, till at last Vaurel said, 'Now, monsieur, this is the nearest the boat can get to Monsieur Gaston's hut. It is just over the brow there.'

We signalled and the boat came silently in.

'Pull out twenty yards, and wait for us, Barnes,' I said to the bo's'un. 'Don't come in till we signal. If we don't come in an hour pull back to the ship,' and we started to cross the neck of the promontory.

Ten minutes' scramble and Vaurel laid his hand on my arm and said, '*Voilà!*' and in front of me I could make out a small hut like a beehive. It was just a darker smudge on the darkness and there was no sign or sound of occupancy.

'You are quite sure?' I whispered.

'Quite sure. I saw him go in several times to-day, and there is no other hut near it.'

We stole to the doorway, which was covered by a mat, and entered. We could not distinguish even the sound of breathing. I struck a match, and the light glimmered on the white face of a young man lying on a bed of dry ferns. Though the face was thin and worn and very sad, I knew by its likeness to Denise that this was the man we sought. He was sleeping quietly with his head on his outstretched arm.

Suddenly his eyes opened wide on the light. He lay for a moment looking at us and then started up into a sitting posture.

'Well, what's it now?' he asked.

'Monsieur Gaston!' said Vaurel in a whisper, in that same tone of loving deference which he used when he spoke to 'Ma'm'selle.'

Gaston peered at him with puckered brow. Then

the match burned out. I struck another and he pointed silently to a tiny earthenware lamp with a wick and oil in it. When I turned from lighting it his face was just breaking into recognition of Vaurel.

'*Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!*' he murmured. 'It is Prudent Vaurel, is it not?'

'In truth, Monsieur Gaston!'

'Prudent Vaurel!' he said again to himself in a tone of extreme wonder, and drew his hand across his eyes as though to clear them of doubt. 'And this, who is this?'

'I am the husband of your sister Denise, Monsieur Gaston. My name is Hugh Lamont. I am an Englishman.'

'The husband of Denise. My poor little Denise! And she is married?'

'She is married, and she only needs one thing to complete her happiness and that is her brother. We have come to ask you to go to her.'

'Go to her? But how?'

'My yacht is off the coast. You can be on board in half an hour.'

He got up and stood facing me, upright and slim, and looked at me with Denise's eyes.

'Do you propose that I should do this?' he asked.

'It was I, Monsieur Gaston,' broke in Vaurel, with what has since struck me as a fine and instant appreciation of his young master's feeling in the matter. 'Ma'm'selle hungers for you. Will you not go to her?'

'Has she also asked it?' he said.

And we stood silent.

'No,' he said, 'it is not possible. I came in by the front door and by the front door I must go out. It will come, my friends. It must come. The good God will not suffer an innocent man to suffer for ever.'

'*Mon Dieu!* how I long to see her!' he broke out again. 'Is she well, monsieur? Is she happy?'

'Denise is well, Gaston, and happy—but for the want of you. As Prudent says, she hungers for you.'

'My poor little Denise. Where is she, monsieur?'

'She is here on the yacht, and aching for the sight of you.'

'Here?' he said, beginning to pace the half-dozen steps the hut allowed him, with a quick turn that showed how used he was to that short caged walk.

'Here? *Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*' and I could see the tight clenching of the jaw inside his sunken cheek.

'You tempt me strongly, Monsieur,' he said at last through his teeth; 'I think you had better go or I may forget myself.'

'Gaston, my brother,' I said, and I gripped his hand in mine, 'I never for one moment believed you would go, nor did Denise, but—it is a long story. We have got Colonel Lepard here.'

'Lepard!' he hissed, blazing and shaking in white fury, 'Lepard! *Mon Dieu!*—to have my hands at his throat—just for a minute! I would shake those cursed lies out of him. The traitor—the liar—where is he?'

'He lies gagged and bound in my boat not ten minutes away.'

He started towards the door.

'Stay, Gaston, that is no good. You will get no word out of him in that way. I have a suggestion. Come with me now out to the yacht and make Denise's heart glad with the sight of you, and I will tell you what we have been attempting on your behalf as we go.'

He looked me through and through with those straight eyes of his which were so very like my wife's.

'You will bring me back?'

'I will bring you back the moment you say the word.'

'You are the husband of Denise. I will trust you. Come, let us go! *Mon Dieu*, Denise, my dear one—to see you again—!'

'Is there any risk in your leaving your hut?' I asked.

'None,' he said. 'I am rarely visited. They know I would not escape if I could. Let us hasten!'

We set off through the darkness, Vaurel in advance, and as we went I hurriedly gave Gaston an outline of some of the late occurrences.

'Zuyler!' he broke in, when I happened to mention his name. 'I knew he was in it. Lepard and I fell out over certain matters—'

'I know—he wanted to marry Denise, and you would not let him.'

'And he planned this thing to get me out of the way, curse him! It has added tenfold to my burden to think that he might be getting his own way with her through my absence. I thank God it is not so. Monsieur Lamont, we owe you much.'

'The debt is all on my side, and we will have you free yet.'

When I told him how we had captured Lepard and held him prisoner all these months, and of his dumb bedevilment, he was amazed. I told him of Vaurel's plan for substituting Lepard for himself and carrying him away in the yacht.

'He is a good fellow, is Prudent,' he said, 'but he does not see things quite as we others do. *Mon Dieu!* how will it all end?' he sighed.

'Sooner or later the truth will come out,' I said; 'for anything we know it may be out now. Be sure we will never cease working for it.'

'You give me hope,' he said warmly.

We reached the shore and signalled to the boat, and when at last she came stealing in, a whisper bundled Lepard into the bows and we stepped on board without another word.

We pulled along the shore to as near as we could guess the place where we landed, and then made straight for the schooner, and the old sea dog, Barnes, had timed his distances so well that we found her with no great difficulty. I could tell by the trium-

phant spring the men put into their oars that they believed that we had succeeded in effecting another escape, and they were full of elation at the fact.

Eager eyes and ears were on the lookout for us, and a little quiet signalling brought us alongside.

I whispered to Vaurel to have the colonel taken back to his cabin and went up the gangway first, with Gaston on my heels. There were no lights on deck, but Denise was at my side as I set foot on it. Gaston heard the rustle of her dress and cried 'Denise!' and she was in his arms in a moment, laughing and crying, and sobbing out the pent-up longings of months. I got them down into the cabin, where the windows were all tightly shrouded so that no gleam should escape outside, and was leaving them together when, to my amazement, I felt the throbbing of the screw, and the yacht was on the move.

Gaston felt it at the same moment and sprang up angrily.

'What is this, Monsieur Lamont? You promised me and I trusted you.'

'Come with me for a moment,' I said. 'I gave no orders. It is a mistake.'

I ran up on deck and he followed me. Lyle was on the bridge and the schooner was heading for the open sea.

'Stop her, captain!' I shouted.

'Why, what's wrong?' he called down.

'Stop her and come down, and I'll tell you.'

He signalled down below and the screw stopped working and he came down to us.

'What's up?' he asked. 'I thought you'd want to put all you could between us and the land before morning.'

'No I'm under pledge to Monsieur Gaston des Comptes to return him to his prison as soon as he says the word. Allow me to introduce you—Gaston, this is Captain Lyle.'

'Well, I am damned!' said Lyle in genuine amazement. 'You want to go back there, sir?'

'I must go back, captain,' said Gaston, in English. 'I am a prisoner, but I am innocent, and to escape would be an admission of guilt. I shall never leave my prison till I leave it without stain.'

'Well, I am—' began Lyle.

'Now, if you will permit me I will return to my sister. My minutes are few,' broke in Gaston, and he went down again to the cabin.

'Well, Lyle, what do you think of that?' I said.

He scratched his head. 'It's all very fine,' he said, 'but it's not business, not the business we came on anyway, I reckon. The men'll be all broke up. They're all as pleased as punch at helping him out; and to take him back!—it's enough to give 'em the sulks.'

'I'm afraid we must consider Monsieur des Comptes's feelings before theirs,' I said. 'And he only consented to come on condition that I took him back.'

'It's for you to say, sir,' he said, but he was evidently much put out.

I went down after a time, to find Denise sitting by her brother's side, his hand in both hers, and her eyes shining and sparkling. She stretched one hand to me and drew me into their communion.

'I was just wanting you, Hugh,' she said. 'Ah, if I could only have you both always I would ask no more.'

'That will come, dearest,' I said. 'You and I will give our lives to it, and the wrong shall be righted if human endeavours can bring it about.'

'How do they treat you, Gaston?' I asked. 'Can we help in any way to make the time more bearable?'

'You can leave me some books and all the tobacco you can spare, and newspapers if you have any. The regulations are not strictly enforced. The new governor is Godefroi de la Rocherelle. You remember him, Denise? He is some relation of ours.'

Godefroi de la Rocherelle!' said Denise, 'why, he

is our fourth—eighth—sixteenth cousin,' and she fell a-thinking.

Gaston turned to me. 'If you could get hold of that man you named, Zuyler, you might pick up the threads. He is purely an adventurer. He is purchasable, I should say.'

'Unfortunately he is dead. Lepard killed him with his own hands at Cour-des-Comptes. Vaurel witnessed it.'

'That is a misfortune,' he said quietly. 'Those two had the whole matter between them.'

'Do you care to see Lepard?' I asked.

He sat for a while with his eyes on the floor, and then said,—

'No, I will not see him. It would do no good and would only rouse the devil in me, as every thought of him did for the first two months. The recollection of my meeting with Denise and yourself will help me more,' and after a while he asked, 'When will you be leaving here?'

'We have no plans made. Can you suggest any means of making this Lepard tell what he knows? I am half inclined to hand him over to the governor for the murder of Captain Zuyler.'

'I know no way of making a man speak if he has made up his mind not to. You could land him and me up the coast where the natives are and let us fight it out. I should kill him and there would be some satisfaction in the doing of it, but—that is not the way out.'

'We will go into the port to-morrow,' said Denise, as the result of her cogitations, 'and learn if anything has turned up in our absence. I have a right to call on our sixteenth cousin surely.'

'You will not tell him you called on me first,' said Gaston.

'No, we will simply make a friendly call as we were in the neighbourhood, and ask what is the latest news from home.'

'I had better get back,' said Gaston. 'Shall I see you again, I wonder?' and he looked wistfully at her.

'You shall see us again and often,' said Denise, and he kissed her and we went up on deck.

We pulled back to the shore in silence, and Vaurel and I accompanied him to his hut, carrying a store of books and such papers as we had picked up on our journeyings, and a good-sized packet of tobacco. He wrung our hands and we went heavily back to the boat.

'*Mon Dieu!* it is foolishness. Why couldn't he come with us and leave that animal Leopard in his place?' growled Vaurel.

'He comes of a race that cannot do mean things, Vaurel.'

'*Sacré nom de Dieu!* mean things! It is those others who keep him there who do the mean things. Monsieur Gaston never did an underhand thing in his life.'

'That's just why he won't steal his liberty.'

But Vaurel considered it all foolishness and would not be comforted.

CHAPTER XXVII

REVELATIONS

THE following day we steamed gaily into the harbour at Noumea, and before any official boat could put off to us our own boat was carrying Denise and myself to the shore.

We were met there by some of the port officials, and Denise's explanations of her relationship to the governor elevated us at once to the position of privileged persons, for whom the ways were to be made smooth and the paths cleared of all obstructions.

We went at once through the dusty, deserted, sand-baked streets to the governor's residence and requested

audience of him. We were shown into a drawing-room which, with its gilt mirrors and polished floor, was just a bit of France transported over sea; and here we had to wait a considerable time while His Excellency dealt with some official business.

But he came in at last with many apologies for the delay, and gave us a hearty welcome. He was a tall, strapping fellow, a Breton every inch of him, and a most polished and courtly gentleman.

He led us out on to the wide verandah and installed us comfortably in creaking basket chairs, and a servant placed a marble-topped round table in the midst of us and proceeded to cover it with various cooling drinks. His Excellency insisted on my trying one of his cigars and then turned gaily to my wife.

'Well, Cousin Denise, this is as unexpected as it is delightful. How many years is it since we met? Let me see, it was down in Picardy, was it not?'

'Yes, at Belmaison. I wonder you remember. I was a mere child.'

'But remarkable even then,' bowed M. le Gouverneur with a beaming smile. 'What a charming old lady the princess is.'

'Was,' corrected Denise. 'She died over six months ago, just before I left Paris.'

'Dear, dear! I heard nothing of it,' he said with a face full of sympathy, 'and to whom did Belmaison go?'

'With the rest, I suppose, to her grandson, Polignac.'

'Ah, Polignac is a black sheep, and Belmaison will be converted into a racing stable and a *café chantant*. The pity of it! And you are married and settled down, *ma cousine*! *Tiens!* how the time flies. I shall begin to search for grey hairs next.'

'In yourself,' said Denise.

'Of course—in myself. One could never associate grey hairs with anything so charming as Mademoiselle

Denise des Comptes or even Madame Hugh Lamont. And have you ever succeeded in arriving at our exact degree of cousinship—eighth was it not?’

‘Sometimes it was eighth, sometimes sixteenth. It depended on circumstances, if I remember rightly.’

‘That was so, I remember,’ he said laughing. ‘And how long are you going to favour us, Monsieur Lamont? That is a very fine boat of yours. I noticed her as you came in this morning. You came all the way in her?’

‘All the way, Your Excellency. She is a capital sea boat.’

‘It was surely an unusually long voyage for so small a craft. I should prefer something larger myself,’ he said with a humorous shrug. ‘I am Breton born, it is true, but my life has unfortunately lain away from the sea.’

In spite of the pleasantness of his welcome and the lightness of our talk, there was a sense of discomfort among us, and M. de la Rocherelle faced the fact at last with the question,—

‘You have come to ask after Gaston. I have done what I could, but it has not been possible to do much. Nor indeed would he permit it.’

‘You do not believe him guilty, Cousin Godefroi?’ asked Denise.

‘I could not believe Gaston des Comptes guilty of anything dishonourable,’ he said, ‘but I am here simply to administer the laws of the colony, and I may not alter them to suit either my wishes or my beliefs.’

‘There has been a ghastly miscarriage of justice in this matter,’ I said, ‘and it is an innocent man you keep imprisoned here, Your Excellency.’

‘I am quite ready to believe that, M. Lamont, but what can I do? Paris sent him here and here he must stop until Paris releases him. Unless, indeed,’ he said, with a lift of the eyebrows at me, ‘he escapes.’

'He will never escape,' said Denise, vehemently.

'Very well—then—' and another shrug intimated that in that case Gaston would have to stop where he was.

'Shall I be allowed to see him?' asked Denise.

'Oh, we will arrange that,' he said, 'but it will be better to do it unofficially. We shall walk up past the settlement and we can drop into Gaston's hut. Shall we say to-morrow? How long do you stay, M. Lamont?'

'I can hardly say, Your Excellency. My wife's wishes will be mine.'

'What news have you from home, Cousin Godefroi?' asked Denise.

'There is nothing of consequence. There were rumours of trouble of some kind among the staff at headquarters.'

'Ah,' said Denise, 'what was that about?'

'I'm sure I don't know. The references were so slight and only in the opposition journals. There was probably no more truth in them than there generally is in rumours of the kind.'

'I wonder if you could lend us some of your latest papers, cousin; we have had no Paris news for months.'

'With greatest pleasure. Excuse me a moment and I will get you a bundle of such as I have.'

'I wonder if there is anything in that?' said Denise, eagerly, when he had left the room.

'We will see when we get the papers.'

His Excellency returned with a bundle of the latest Paris papers he had received, with many apologies for their age and the promise of some later ones in a few days.

'There's a mail overdue,' he said, 'and it may arrive any day. Now you will favour me with your company to dinner to-morrow night? It is an official dinner, and the members of my staff and their wives will be here. It will give you the chance of seeing

what the society of Noumea is like. It is not overstimulating,' he said, with a shrug, 'and I shall be glad of an alternative.'

We promised to come, and rowed back to the ship with our treasure trove.

We studied those papers closely during the afternoon. The hints and rumours were there indeed, as the governor had said, and to us, with our special knowledge of certain matters, they possessed a significance which was of course withheld from him.

The rumours—all of course in the papers of the opposition; the Government organs were discreetly silent up to the date of the last paper we had—hinted at discoveries and discrepancies at the War Office which the officials were strenuously endeavouring to keep dark, but which the editors of these papers promised to drag to the light of day in the interests of truth and their own side. No names were mentioned, but there were hints of defalcations, peculations of secret service funds, abscondings, and so on, and Denise, after breathlessly reading out every word on the subject, looked up at me with glowing face, and said, 'Oh, I wish we had the next week's papers. Don't you see, Hugh, all this points to Colonel Leopard and Captain Zuyler. At the time these things were written their disappearance was causing talk in official circles. Then would come suspicion, then inquiries, then domiciliary visits and seizures of papers and effects. Surely among them would be found something pointing to the truth. They could not have destroyed everything bearing on the matter, and such a very little thing might put them on the right track.'

'The cleverest man generally overlooks something when he sets out to destroy evidence,' I said, 'and we certainly did not give the colonel much time to think about things.'

'I wish we had those next papers,' she said.

Very early next morning as I stood in the bows

while Jim Barrett played on me refreshingly with the hose, for bathing in those waters held more risks than inducements, his aim fell suddenly aslant and my bracing douche went splashing over the rail.

'Steady, Jim, my man,' I said; 'aim straight.'

'Beg pardon, sir. Here's something coming and she took my eye.'

I turned and saw a steamer coming slowly up the bay—a Government dispatch boat, bringing no doubt the tardy mails. She was evidently crippled, but she was well handled, and ran to her moorings and brought up there and dropped a boat for the shore, with all the precision of the service and much practice.

Denise came up presently to look at her, all eagerness to go ashore and procure papers, and Vaurel, leaning on the rail alongside us, gave us his ideas on those we had passed on to him the night before when we had done with them, and which he had been studying ever since.

'They've tumbled to him, Ma'm'selle,' he said, 'as sure as guns. Everything they say, though they don't say it very straight, points to Colonel Leopard. They'll think he's bolted, and they'll root things up, and they're bound to come across something sooner or later, and then the truth will come out. Hello, what's this?'

This was a steam launch coming foaming along towards us with a curl of white spray at her bows, and a big tricolour streaming out astern, and shrill whistles flying ahead of her to attract our attention.

'His Excellency's launch,' I ventured.

'With news for us!' said Denise, full of excitement.

'His Excellency himself, unless I am mistaken,' I said again, as a tall figure in uniform stood up in the stern and waved gaily to us.

'Good news!' gasped Denise, and the launch curved into the gangway, and the governor came quickly up the steps.

'News?' said Denise, meeting him with all her heart in her eyes.

'The best of news,' he said. 'Can we go below?'

We went down, and Vaurel followed. The governor glanced at him inquiringly and then recognised him.

'What, Vaurel?' he said, and shook him by the hand. 'Where did we meet last, my friend?'

'Gravelotte, Excellency,' said Prudent, drawing himself up and saluting.

'Gravelotte it was,' said His Excellency, 'and a hot time we had of it.'

He was opening up a number of papers, and now handed one in an official envelope to Denise.

'I could not let you wait a moment for this, cousin,' he said, 'so I brought it myself. The papers I have hardly looked at, but I see they are full of it,' and he handed a number of journals to Vaurel and me.

But I knew that the letter Denise was reading was the kernel of the whole matter, and I was watching her.

The tears were streaming down her cheeks, and she had to dash them from her eyes once or twice in order to finish reading, then I heard her murmur, 'My God, I thank Thee!' and she fell on her knees by the saloon table and hid her face in her hands.

I picked up the letter and looked at M. de la Rocherelle. He nodded, and I read the letter through. It was addressed to himself and was signed by the President of the Republic. It ran:—

'M. LE GOUVERNEUR,—As a result of an inquisition into the affairs and papers of an officer of the general staff, Colonel Lepard, full particulars concerning whom you will find in the accompanying documents, it is certain that in the matter of Captain Gaston des Comptes, condemned for treason, and presently a prisoner in your hands, a grave mistake has been made. From the absconder's papers it is proved beyond doubt that the accusation on which Captain

des Comptes was condemned was a false accusation, concocted by the officer above named and another to serve their own ends.

‘I require you, therefore, immediately on receipt of this letter, to release Captain des Comptes and to inform him of these facts.

‘You will procure for him a passage back to France with the least possible delay, and will treat him meanwhile in the way which your own good sense will dictate under the circumstances.

‘You will further convey to Captain des Comptes the profound regret of France at the undeserved injury, humiliation and suffering unwittingly inflicted on an innocent and honourable man, and the assurance that his country will not be slow to make such amends as may be in her power.’

I bent and kissed the back of Denise’s neck, which was the only available spot, and at a nod of permission from the governor, passed the letter on to Vaurel, but he had got the gist of it from the journals already, and his big face was ablaze with excitement as he turned again to the journal spread out on the table in front of him, and pointed to a certain place in it where, bending with him, I read the following announcement:—

‘The evasion of the defaulter, Lepard, is causing the Government the gravest anxiety. To-night a reward of 100,000 francs is offered for information which may lead to his apprehension. How skilfully his plans have been laid, however, is proved by the fact that since Colonel Lepard left Paris in the early morning of August 16 all trace of him has been lost. It was believed that he had gone down into Bretagne, to Cour-des-Comptes, near Rennes, but no trace of him can be discovered there, and the police are wholly at fault. It is useless stating the various rumours which place the absconder at once in America, Brazil, Japan,

and of course London. It is hoped, however, that the reward mentioned may have the effect of bringing news of him from no-matter-where, and if only the authorities can lay hands upon him they will ask no questions and pay prompt cash.'

'There is a fortune for someone,' murmured Vaurel.

'For M. Prudent Vaurel,' I replied, and he murmured, '*Mon Dieu! mon, Dieu!*'

When Denise rose from her knees her face was radiantly happy.

'And Gaston?' she asked of the governor.

'He is at my house awaiting you. I went for him myself instantly, and then came at once for you. I did not tell him you were here, however. This good news,' he said, tapping the President's letter, 'was enough at a time. You will be able to announce yourself.'

'We will go at once,' she said, and went to her cabin.

'I wonder where that devil Lepard can have got to?' said His Excellency. 'I see they are offering a big sum for him. He knows too much, I expect, for them to feel safe till they get him into their hands again.'

Vaurel was like to burst with his information. He looked at me, but I doubt if he could have held it a moment longer.

'We have him on board here, M. le Gouverneur,' he said, drawing himself up and saluting again.

'What?' shouted the governor, with a jump that tumbled his cocked hat on to the floor. 'Lepard—here? How in the devil's name do you come to have him here?'

'Is it true, monsieur?' he asked, turning to me, 'or is our friend Vaurel gone cracked with the good news?'

'It is quite true,' I said, 'and Vaurel there is entitled to the reward. It was he brought him on board in the Bay of Biscay in an open boat.'

'You are sure it is he? There is no mistake?'

'There is no mistake,' I said. 'We knew it was his

devilment sent Gaston here, and he has other matters to answer for also. Come, and you shall see him. Do you know him by sight, M. le Gouverneur?'

'Yes, I know him, but I never associated much with him. There was something about him I did not like.'

I led the way to Macpherson's cabin and unlocked the door. Lepard lurched round as he always did so that his back was turned towards us. But Vaurel took him by the shoulder and rolled him over in order to give the governor a good view of his scowling face and sullen eyes.

'The hair on his face alters him considerably. But it is he,' he said. 'Colonel Lepard'—he touched the colonel's shoulder with his finger-tips—'I arrest you in the name of the Republic you have betrayed. I will send for you.'

'We will not take him with us,' he said, as we left the room. 'It would only spoil Madame's happiness at meeting her brother.'

'I think I ought perhaps to tell Your Excellency that Gaston spent the evening before last on board here with us,' I said.

'What?' he cried again, as though doubting his ears.

'You see Denise was absolutely pining for a sight of her brother, so we went ashore and brought him off and he spent the evening with us.'

He threw back his head and laughed loud and long, and I wondered what Colonel Lepard thought he was laughing at.

'This is a ship of surprises,' he said at last. 'Have you anything else to tell me? I'd better have it all at once.'

'I can tell you one more thing. It may or may not surprise Your Excellency. You want Colonel Lepard for—I don't know what you will call it exactly—but for putting away Gaston des Comptes. He is guilty of another crime, I won't say a graver one.'

He murdered his accomplice, Captain Zuyler, in the woods at Cour-des-Comptes, by beating in his head with an iron bar. Vaurel witnessed it.'

'*Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!*' said His Excellency. 'What a devil it is! I can readily believe that of him. It is exactly what one would expect that kind of man to do if he thought the other was going to round on him.'

'That was it exactly. But there is Denise awaiting us in the boat.'

'Come along, Vaurel, *mon ami*,' said the governor, catching his anxious eye. 'We shall want you on shore. Certainly bring the dog too, if he won't eat any of my people.'

'You are a most amazing set of people on board that yacht,' he said to Denise, as the launch carried us swiftly up the harbour; 'if you were going to make a long stay here I should be afraid you'd turn the island upside down.'

'I am very thankful it has all come out right. I was sure it would, but I did not see how it was going to,' she said.

'And if it hadn't you would have helped it, is it not so, cousin?'

'I don't see how we could. We did our best, but the colonel would not open his mouth.'

'And why would he not open his mouth?'

'I suppose because he knew we so much wanted him to,' she said.

'I see. There is a good deal yet to be told evidently, M. Lamont.'

'You shall have the whole story whenever Your Excellency says the word.'

'And, meanwhile, let me see. You brought Leopard out here on the yacht. You took Gaston out to the yacht and then returned him to his prison. Why the devil did you not exchange them and carry Gaston away and leave the other in his place?'

'Well, to tell the truth, that was Vaurel's idea of

what we ought to do, and on the face of it it wasn't a bad idea, but there was one difficulty.'

'And that was—?'

'Gaston. He would not hear of it.'

'Of course he wouldn't,' said Denise. 'I told you all so the moment I heard of it.'

'He wouldn't go?' said the governor.

'He flatly refused, and was somewhat hurt that anyone could have considered him capable of such a thing.'

'Well, well, there are not many like him. And he has stood it all these months. He is a brave boy.'

'You will let him go home with us in the yacht, Cousin Godefroi?' asked Denise.

'Assuredly! I am instructed to procure him passage back to France, and he could not go quicker or better than with you. Will you take the other one too?'

'Horrors, no! I never want to see him, or hear of him, or think of him again. Relieve us of him as soon as you can, I beg of you.'

'Will you send him home?' I asked.

'I shall cable for instructions from Sydney. Possibly they would sooner not have him back and will instruct me to put him away here. *Mon Dieu!* but they will be glad to hear we have got him safe! What are you going to do with that 100,000 francs, Vaurel, *mon gars?*'

'I have not got it yet, Excellency,' said Vaurel, with a broad smile.

'But you shall have it, my friend, or my name's not De la Rocherelle. You wouldn't like to stop here and help me keep my black sheep in their folds, would you?'

'*Mon Dieu*, no Excellency, I thank you! I would sooner help some of the least black out. I have had enough of keeping prisoners, and I was in prison once myself—in Prussia, you know,' he added quickly, 'and I knew what it feels like!'

We hardly knew Gaston when he met us on the verandah of the governor's house. He was clipped and shaved, and dressed in a captain's uniform, which the governor had borrowed from one of his aides, and he looked very different from the unkempt and roughly-clad prisoner of two nights before. But he was Denise's Gaston, and the greeting between them was from the depths of their hearts.

We sat and talked with great content on the governor's verandah all the afternoon. We told His Excellency all our story, and he enjoyed it greatly, and whenever he thought of Gaston coolly spending his evening on the yacht he laughed heartily.

'When you tell your adventures I think you must suppress that part, for my sake,' he said, 'or they will be thinking at home that our discipline is somewhat lax, which indeed it is, but there is no need to rub the fact into them. It's quite bad enough for the poor devils to be here at all.'

Then the guests arrived—a colonel, a major, two or three captains, and several lieutenants, accompanied by their wives, so far as they were possessed of them. They could not quite make out how Gaston's sister had arrived on the scene so opportunely, and they were puzzled at her cousinship to the governor, which implied a similar relationship on Gaston's part of which they had had no previous idea.

They praised the beauty of the yacht, and spoke enthusiastically of the way the men rowed the gig, and were amazed when they learned that we had actually come all the way from France in that very small ship.

The ladies eyed Denise's frock with keen curiosity, and questioned her closely, but with perfect politeness, as to the latest Paris fashions. They said what a perfectly charming devil of a dog Boulot was, but did not offer to touch him, and the men looked somewhat askance at him, and said that his high breeding was very apparent. And Boulot sat with his shoulders up

in his ears and panted heavily, and snuffled the dust out of his nose so violently that they were in a state of perpetual uneasiness, under the impression that he was about to make an unprovoked attack upon them.

They all vied with one another in courteous congratulations to Gaston on his rehabilitation. They hoped he had not found his sojourn on the island over trying, and wished they were in his shoes, going back to Paris, to the warm heart of the mother country. They sighed for Paris, for the Boulevards, the cafés, the theatres, the fashions, the scandals. Paris contained everything that made life worth living, and here were they withering amid the dust, and the heat, and the galvanised iron roofs, and the last year's fashions, and all the news months old.

'*Nom de Dieu!*' said the grey little major. 'there might be half-a-dozen revolutions and we never hear a word of it all. I wonder if they've caught that rascal Lepard yet. We may not hear of it for months.'

'If they ever catch him at all,' said the colonel. 'He is a very clever man, in his way, is Colonel Lepard, and he's not to be caught napping, if I know anything of his character.'

'You knew him, M. le Colonel?' asked one of the lieutenants, ingratiatingly.

'I have fought beside him, and he was a very great fighter, but not a man to like. An awful bully with his men. *Mon Dieu*, how they did hate him!'

'*Eh, bien!* M. le Colonel,' said His Excellency, 'for once we shall get ahead of Paris and you shall have news for which Paris is hungering.'

There was an expectant silence round the table and all their eyes were fixed on him.

'Monsieur Lepard is here,' he said impressively, and a thrill ran round the guests. 'M. Lamont has been so good as to bring him to us on his yacht, as a prisoner.'

They could hardly take it all in, and as for under-

standing it that was quite out of the question, but once they were sure it was not one of His Excellency's jokes, their tongues wagged furiously, and the air was thick with expletives and exclamations, and they were very greatly excited, and very much elated at turning the tables on Paris for once.

His Excellency had so greatly enjoyed the ripple he had created that he tried again.

'Moreover,' he said, 'Monsieur Lepard has still another crime to answer for. Did any of you know Captain Zuyler?'

'He was in Algiers with me,' said the major. 'He was killed by a lunatic down in Bretagne just the other day.'

'He was the accomplice of this Lepard,' said the governor, 'and it was Lepard who killed him with his own hands. I have the witness here, and the proofs on the spot will be unanswerable, I understand.'

His Excellency had reason to be amply satisfied with the sensation he had produced, and for once the members of his staff had something to talk about beyond the narrow limits of their island life, and they swelled big whenever they remembered that Paris was all in the dark, and that this extraordinary news was so far theirs alone.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOW GASTON CAME HOME

Two days later we sailed for Sydney. The governor accompanied us in his launch as far as was compatible with his sense of personal comfort and safety, and then waved a final '*bon voyage*,' while his launch shrieked the same with its syren and then chuff-chuffed energetically back up the bay. The population of

Noumea, so far as they were at liberty to do so, turned out to show their sense of what was due to the man who had so patiently borne an unmerited imprisonment, and whom now the nation delighted to honour. The crew of the dispatch boat shouted their good wishes, and New Caledonia sank astern and became a memory, which for some of us the years might soften, but which for one at all events it would take more than a lifetime to efface.

We had on board one of the governor's aides, Captain Lemarc, a pleasant, light-hearted fellow, in the highest of spirits at the prospect of a few days' release from the prison house, and bursting with the importance of his mission, for he was going to electrify France with the news of the capture of Lepard and to bring back the Government's instructions concerning him. The dispatch boat was still undergoing repairs and would bring him back on her next trip.

Captain Lemarc's light-heartedness and high spirits, however, barely sufficed to carry him through the day, and as evening drew on and the schooner began to roll to the swell, they dwindled by degrees and came at last to vanishing point.

Dinner finished him completely. He rose precipitately after the first course, with a very white face, murmured through his clenched teeth, 'Excuse me, I have business on deck,' and retreated in fairly good order.

When we came up later on we found him, with one arm slipped through the shrouds, pensively watching the swell and seethe of the dark water below, and when I tendered him my sympathy he groaned, 'God made the dry land but the devil made the sea,' and I helped him down to his cabin and got him comfortably on his back in his bunk, and left him to meditate on the possibilities of a French army crossing the silver strait to conquer Britain.

Gaston was not troubled by the sea. He had all a

Breton's love for the water, and had been on friendly terms with it all his life.

It was a pleasure to us all, and to Denise a rapturous delight, to see the shadow draw from his face, and the light of life and hope begin to glow in it once more. He did not talk much at first, for the weight of it all was on him still, but he sat with us on deck in the glorious sunshine, and the nip of the salt wind brought the colour to his cheeks, and before we raised Mount Lindsay there was new light in his eyes, and by the time we rounded Port Jackson Light, on the fifth day, he was a new man entirely.

And how Denise chattered during those five days! Her merry tongue was busy with the past—but not the near past; that was to be buried and forgotten as quickly as possible—and the delicious present and the glorious future, and her joyous laughter rippled along the deck like a peal of silver bells, till the men grinned out of sheer sympathy and from pleasure at the sound of it.

Lyle acknowledged now that, as things had turned out, Gaston's view had been the right one, but no amount of argument could convince him that he wouldn't have been perfectly justified in accepting the chance of escape when it was proffered him. And I think both he and the men would have been better satisfied in their own minds with our part of the business if we had carried him off against his will and left Lepard in his place.

When we turned through the Heads into the smooth waters of Port Jackson, Captain Lemarc stole quietly up from below and joined us as we stood watching the rocky shores slip past. His sallow cheeks had still a greenish tinge, but the sight of dry land brought a sparkle of anticipation to his eyes.

'*Mon Dieu!*' said he, 'what a frightful thing this sea is, and how one suffers! Thank God I'm not a sailor!'

'If you were you wouldn't suffer, captain,' said Denise; 'you'd get used to it.'

'Never!' he exclaimed with deep conviction; 'no, not if I lived on it for a hundred years. I was ill every day of the voyage out, and I wished to die, but they would not let me. When I arrived I was a shadow, a veritable shadow. It took me months to recover.'

'I wonder you consented to come this trip,' said Denise.

'Ah, madame, duty, you understand, and besides, after six months in Noumea one is ready to risk one's life for a change. I anticipate much pleasure from my visit to New Sous Vales.'

We ploughed gaily up Sydney Cove and dropped anchor abreast of Circular Quay, and half an hour later we were all, and especially Captain Lemarc, enjoying a merry lunch at the big new hotel in Collins Street.

Then Captain Lemarc, having made an astonishingly rapid recovery under the influences of solid earth and a bottle of champagne, started off, with a face attuned to the importance of his mission, to hunt up the French Consul in Wynyard Square; Lyle went back to the yacht to settle his coaling arrangements, while Denise and Gaston and I set out for a stroll through the town.

Boulot and his master had come ashore with us, the former enjoying the immobility of the land fully as much as did Captain Lemarc. But our friend Vaurel, though his shyness had worn off somewhat in the company of Denise and myself, felt altogether too much abashed by the size of our party to join us at the hotel, and had preferred making a voyage of discovery on his own account. Boulot hung whimsically in the wind when we separated, having a mind to follow us as being more probably productive of bones, and other delicacies, and yet not liking to be

parted from his master. He sat on the quay, a brindled Mr Facing-both-ways, and grinned cheerfully through his eye-teeth first at the one retreating party and then at the other, and wagged his stump of a tail spasmodically at whichever looked round at him, and at last we saw him turn his back disdainfully upon us, and with his tail like a bit of iron railing he rose despondently to the path of duty and trotted heavily after his master.

Now, whether the telegraph office leaked—which is not likely, since Lemarc was certain to use an official cypher—or whether, which is much more probable, Captain Lemarc leaked himself, for he was full to bursting of his important news—rumours of our arrival, and of the strange circumstances surrounding our visit, got abroad. The *Echo* and the *Evening News* both made mention of the important event, and when we got back to the hotel quite a little mob of excited reporters from all the morning and weekly papers was awaiting us, every man of them hungering and thirsting for full and exclusive information for his own particular journal.

We learned that the Sydney papers had already published the facts concerning the gross miscarriage of justice in Gaston's case, but these irrepressible and keen-nosed young gentlemen of the Press had somewhere got a hint of something more behind, and for the moment the whole end and aim of the energetic lives was to get to the bottom of it, and we had a great time trying to bluff them off, for we did not feel entitled to open our mouths concerning Lepard till Captain Lemarc had heard from his people at home.

But in spite of us they got hold of it somehow. Perhaps they captured Vaurel, perhaps some smart youth pulled out to the yacht and pumped the men. Anyhow the papers next morning were full of it, and fairly accurate too, and at mid-day the governor and his wife drove up in state to visit us and to offer their

congratulations, and to hear the whole strange story from our own lips.

They pressed upon us the hospitality of Government House, with the most charming cordiality, but Gaston for some time begged off, and it only when he was assured of a privacy infinitely greater than any the hotel could afford that he at last consented to go.

Denise was in a state of exuberant delight. With Gaston at liberty and going back home to receive such *amende honorable* as the mother country could make for a gross injustice unwittingly perpetrated, she was, as she had promised, perfectly happy. She took life very joyously and her joy was mine.

So we drove away with our new friends to the official residence, and if we had been intimate relations and friends of old standing we could not have been made more heartily welcome.

Captain Lemarc, however, had not suffered all the miseries of the sea voyage for the sake of comparing the internal arrangements of one Government House with those of another, and he preferred the liberty of the hotel. His excuses were so exceedingly ingenious, and were expressed with such immense volubility and so great a show of frankness, that they deceived nobody, not even himself. He had come for a fling, and to shake off the dust of Noumea, and he was his own master, and he wanted to enjoy himself in his own way.

He came tearing up in a hurry on the second day, however, to give us the news he had just received by cable—Lepard was to be taken back to France by a cruiser returning from the China station.

‘He will be there almost as soon as you, if you stop a few days at each place. You’ll be in at the death anyway. I wish I was going,’ he said. But as far as that was concerned, we would willingly have exchanged places with him.

Vaurel and Boulot also preferred the freedom of

the ship, Vaurel did, at all events, and Boulot's stern sense of duty forbade him to desert his master.

Three very pleasant, restful days we spent at Government House, in those very pleasant rooms overlooking the Domain and Farm Cove, with its great black war-ships and the many-legged water-beetles skimming incessantly between them and the shore.

I think Lady —— had had a lurking hope that Gaston would consent to at least one official dinner, or a garden party, or some little function of the kind, for the satisfaction of her many friends. But his wounds were still too raw, and he begged for privacy so modestly and so earnestly that she could not possibly feel hurt, but, on the contrary, found herself conferring a favour by sacrificing her own wishes to his, and thereby obtained almost as much enjoyment as she would have done out of the garden party.

We rode and drove about the city and its environs with the governor and his wife, courting no more notice than was inevitable in such distinguished company, and on the fourth day we said good-bye to our friends and started to cross the other half of the world on our way home.

Our voyage was prosperous and uneventful. As it was not likely that any of us would ever be round that way again, we took things easily and saw all that was to be seen wherever we stopped to coal. From Colombo we went up to Bombay to give Denise an impression of India, thence to Aden and Suez, whence we ran over to Cairo, and joined the yacht again at Alexandria. Then to Malta, and so to Marseilles, where we left the *Clutha* to make her way back to Southampton. But the moment we touched French soil there came a sudden end to all privacy and the quiet enjoyment of life.

There was no possibility of mistaking the feeling of the warm-hearted nation.

Here was a man, young and noble, who had borne unmerited disgrace, and all the sufferings it entailed, with the calm endurance of a martyr. Bit by bit the whole story had leaked out, and France was waiting impatiently to elevate him to the trying position of hero.

Gaston, if he had had his own way, would have slipped quietly through to Paris, and reported himself at headquarters, and placed himself at the disposal of the authorities.

But that was out of the question. The people wanted their hero and were not to be denied. They must demonstrate their feeling for him or burst.

The authorities had come to know that Gaston des Comptes was a man above the common. They decided to open the safety-valve of popular feeling and let it have full play. The result was that when we stepped ashore from the *Clutha's* gig we were received by the general in command of the district, with his staff, and the Prefect of Toulon, and all the notabilities, and a guard of honour drawn from Gaston's own regiment, which had witnessed his degradation, while in the background a vast concourse of citizens and citizenesses roared a mighty welcome to the man who had been wronged.

It was a trying ordeal for Gaston. But in the long, pleasant days of our travelling together, and in the quiet communion of many night pacings of the dark deck, I had come to know this man and to admire and love him beyond all others. For there was in him a height and depth of nobility which it amazed me beyond words to think could ever have been doubted, and I knew that he would come through this time as bravely as he had come through a worse one. I count it as one of the highest privileges, as well as one of the greatest pleasures of my life, to have stood by the side of Gaston des Comptes at this time, and to have watched the modesty and gallantry of his bearing.

I can see his fine, clear-cut face, the strength of it accentuated by the tenseness of his self-repression, which thinned the cheeks and squared the jaw, and threw into prominence the high Breton cheek bones, and the calm glow of the dark eyes as he replied, modestly and brokenly, to the warm welcome and congratulations of the officials.

Then, escorted by the guard of honour, and the roaring crowd beyond, we were driven slowly to the hotel, General C—— occupying the fourth seat in the carriage and beaming all over with genuine enjoyment of the popular feeling.

As for Denise, my wife, since the first moment my eyes fell on her pictured face in the Salon, she has always been to me the most beautiful woman in the world. But now she was absolutely transfigured. Her face was radiant and dazzling with happiness, enjoyment, gratitude, triumph—all these and more. It was the face of a triumphant angel right from heaven with the light of heaven outshining from it still.

And the thought that this glorious creature was my wife, and happy in that state, made me at once a proud and humble and very grateful man.

How thoroughly and intensely she enjoyed this complete realisation of all her hopes, and the triumphant vindication of the family honour!

I caught her only the other day reading aloud to another Gaston and another Denise—Master Gaston Lamont and Miss Denise of that ilk, aged ten and eight respectively, who were listening with open mouths and sparkling eyes—the account of it all in a treasured copy of the *Petite Marseillaise*, and my wife looked up at me with that same transfigured face of hers, and laughed a happy laugh, and said, ‘What a glorious time it was, Hugh!’

And looking over her shoulder for a moment, while the eager youngsters urged, ‘Go on, mother, tell us more of Uncle Gaston,’ I read:—

‘Madame La Monte (*née Des Comptes*), who shared with her brother the triumph of this national welcome home, is of a beauty remarkable and indescribable. But that it is altogether sweet and noble, one would be tempted to describe it as ‘*beauté de diable*,” for assuredly it is not of the earth earthly. More correctly let us call it then “*beauté des anges*,” for if ever woman’s face shone with inspired light most assuredly did the face of Captain des Comptes’ sister as we saw her yesterday. And this young lady, with her husband, a Scotchman of the noble house of La Monte—whose very name denotes a Gallic origin—has circumnavigated the globe in that frail yacht which dropped anchor so quietly in the port yesterday morning, for—in the original intention—the simple purpose of being near the brother, of whose innocence she never had one moment’s doubt; but, as it turns out, by a most extraordinary coincidence, for the purpose of bringing him home to the welcome which France offers to one of the noblest and bravest of her sons,’ and so on and so on.

And as I bent over her I kissed her smooth brown hair and said, ‘It was truly a great and glorious time, and that is just exactly how you looked,’ and I went out, so as not to keep the children any longer from their pleasure, and as I went I felt as I had felt that other day, and as I have ever felt since first she put her hand into mine and gave her life into my keeping, a proud man and humble, but most of all profoundly grateful for this crowning blessing of my life—my wife Denise.

Our privacy, as I have said, was at an end from the moment our feet touched French soil. We were public characters and there was no getting out of it.

There was a great reception at the hotel that night, and we were perforce the centre of it all, and the next morning we swept away northward, still the

travelling centre of a tornado of popular feeling which broke out afresh at every place at which the train stopped.

It was the same when we reached Paris. The people were on the lookout for us, and we drove from the station to the Des Comptes' mansion in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne through a mob that cheered and ran and would not be denied.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

AND now there came a busy time for all of us.

The house seemed never free from visitors who flocked in to tender their congratulations and to see with their own eyes and hear with their own ears the principal actors in this dramatic little episode of real life—old friends of the family, who vowed they had never for one moment believed the insinuations against Gaston; officers and officials of all degrees, who came out of pure good fellowship and curiosity; pressmen and artists, who came out of curiosity alone, and to all it was necessary to be as polite and in-formatory as one's weariness of it all permitted.

Among our first callers was the Abbé Dieufoy.

After congratulating Gaston he took snuff very elegantly, and regarded Denise and myself with his head whimsically on one side as though appraising us.

'Monsieur Lamont,' he said at length, 'you have picked up the French language with extraordinary rapidity.'

'I have had an excellent teacher, monsieur,' I said.

'All the same,' he said, with half-a-dozen knowing nods, 'your progress has been most remarkable.'

'I found him a most apt pupil, Monsieur l'Abbé,' laughed Denise.

'He does you infinite credit, madame,' said the abbé.

'And Madame the Duchesse de St Ouen?' I asked.

'She is well, but has hardly yet recovered from her disappointment in connection with certain events. However,' he said, with a gentle shrug, 'it is not possible for everyone to be satisfied in this world. If I may judge by appearances madame's disappointment is not shared in certain other quarters, and if the happiness of the greater number has resulted—*que voulez-vous?*'

Monsieur l'Abbé looked as if he would have liked, as the spiritual adviser of the family of Des Comptes, to enter into other questions, but fresh visitors came in, and those questions were not put and never have been put.

When Monsieur des Comptes married an English-woman, an arrangement was come to that any sons of the union should follow their mother's religion, while the daughters follow their father's, a wise enough provision on the part of the family priest, for the hold of the Church is always strongest on the feminine side. But when we came to settle in England, Denise threw in her lot with her husband and brother and became a Protestant also, and our children follow in our steps without any questioning.

Gaston presented himself at the office of the Minister of War next morning by special command and was received by that functionary with impressive cordiality, and later in the day was received in like manner by the President himself.

Then in due course he was brought before another court-martial, which formally reversed the decision of the original one, pronounced him guiltless of the charges on which he had previously been condemned, restored him therefore to the position he was in before the trial, and left it to the authorities to make such reparation as they deemed advisable for the unde-

served suffering and obloquy which had been placed upon him by Lepard's treachery.

What form such reparation would take had been a matter of much debate in the papers, and many wild suggestions had been made. I cannot deny that Denise and myself had also discussed the matter between ourselves. For of the righteousness of reparation there could be no question, and I must confess that I could not rise to the full height of the *Des Comptes'* sense of honour and dignity when my wife stoutly asserted that Gaston would accept nothing.

But when it came to the point that was the position which he quietly took up.

Popular feeling demanded that full and ample amends should be made for the wrong done him. Popular feeling could not at all understand the delicate sense of honour which recoiled at thought of material reparation. His absolute innocence of the charges brought against him had been made clear before the eyes of the world. He asked no more.

Many offers were made to him, we knew, though he never discussed them with us. But he would have none of them. Finally, under extreme pressure, and simply as the official cachet of his complete rehabilitation with his chiefs, he accepted a double step and became the youngest colonel in the army. But, incidentally, the high stand he took in this whole matter wrought powerfully on his future. He was accepted everywhere, inside official circles and outside, as a man whose honour was beyond question, and whose absolute trustworthiness none might dispute, and his subsequent rise was rapid. He was General of Division at thirty-five and has not yet reached the full height of his advancement.

Vaurel and Boulot were with us at the house in the Avenue du Bois de Boulogne, the authorities having intimated to the former that he would be required at the second trial of Colonel Lepard, when he would

be arraigned for the murder of Captain Zuyler, after he had been formally tried by court-martial and degraded for his action in Gaston's affair.

Lepard had arrived before us. His voyaging had not been so leisurely as ours. Report said that from the moment he came into the hands of the authorities out in Noumea he had been under the strictest surveillance day and night, but that he had never uttered one single word. In my own mind I came to wonder if by some strange dispensation he had been stricken dumb, for it seemed incredible that simply of his own strong will he should have maintained so absolute a silence for so long a time.

Vaurel had been examined as to his knowledge of the murder, and in the result Louis Vard and Père Goliot and Juliot the *gendarme* were summoned to Paris as witnesses, and M. l'Abbé Dieufoy was thrown into a state of considerable perturbation by being also called to the trial.

The court-martial was not open to the public. The result only was made known. Lepard was degraded and dismissed from the army, and was then handed over to the Civil power to be tried on the capital charge, and that trial I attended. Gaston declined to go near the place. Denise, of course, kept clear of the whole matter, though her interest in it was intense.

Lepard, as he sat in civilian dress, between two stalwart *gendarmes* in the well of the court, was the unpleasing objective of all eyes.

He was thinner than when I saw him last, and the hair had been allowed to grow on his face, which was set back in a black scowl like a cast-iron mask.

He sat with folded arms gazing stolidly in front of him, and as I looked at him the idea grew upon me that the dumb devil, which he had invoked at the first for our frustration, had in course of time taken complete possession of him, and held him now in thrall, mind, body and soul. Why he had not long since

made away with himself, whenever he saw the game was lost, I could only set down to the fact that the surveillance over him had been so rigid that no possible chance had been left to him.

The official procedure, which differed so greatly from that of our English Courts, interested me greatly, but the direct conversational methods employed by the judge to the prisoner failed to impress me, more especially since they were productive of no results.

The case against him was developed rapidly by the Public Prosecutor.

Prudent Vaurel was called, and detailed the conversation between Lepard and Zuyler under the tree in which he had sat watching for Roussel. He described the actual facts of the murder as he had witnessed them, and of his own arrest by Juliot, and his subsequent release on Lepard's assertion that it was Roussel who struck down Zuyler.

The Abbé Dieufoy described his meeting with Lepard and the latter's confident assertion that Roussel was the murderer.

Louis Vard and old Goliot—the latter in a state of abject limpness at being so far removed from his ordinary round of life—proved the fact of Roussel's presence near the station many miles away from the tragedy at the very time the tragedy was enacting.

The Court had accorded the prisoner counsel, but it might have saved itself the trouble. Prisoner took no notice.

Even when Vaurel dramatically described the actual murder, and the self-inflicted wounds of the murderer, and his dabbling himself with his victim's blood, he showed not the slightest interest. I am convinced his brain had given way, or, as I have said, had surrendered himself into the keeping of the dumb devil.

The end came swift and sudden, while the judge was haranguing him somewhat heatedly with a view to rouse him from his stubborn silence.

I was watching Lepard intently. I could not help it. He fascinated me.

Suddenly I saw the black face suffuse with blood. Grey-black one moment, the next it was black-red, and the next moment, with his arms still folded, he fell crashing forward against the front of his enclosure and lay still.

The *gendarmes*, who had come to expect no movement from him, grabbed him convulsively and hauled him up, but his head hung limply on his chest and his face was dabbled with blood—his own this time, and presently one of them looked up at the startled judge and said, '*Mon Dieu, monsieur, he is dead!*'

And dead he was, and at first they could not make out how he died. 'By the visitation of God' was the favourite theory, though why such merciful visitation should have been vouchsafed to so great a scoundrel just when most he needed it seemed hard to reconcile with one's elementary ideas of justice.

But the doctors soon put another and simpler aspect on the matter. He was a bull-necked man with a predisposition to apoplexy. Wedged tight in his throat they found a plug of black cloth, torn from the lining of his coat, which he had evidently kept in his mouth with this end in view, and had swallowed when he considered it time to go.

It had choked him as effectually as a garrote. The convulsion had burst a blood vessel in the brain, and he died as he had intended.

The Court broke up in confusion and we all streamed out wondering, and then by degrees the truth was made known to us.

In due course Vaurel received his 100,000 francs. He asked us rather shamefacedly if we thought he ought to take them, seeing that Monsieur Gaston would take nothing of all they wanted to give him. But Denise satisfied him that the cases were quite different, and none knew better than I how thoroughly

well he deserved his reward. So, without more compunction, he took it, and went back home to Cour-des-Comptes a wealthy man.

He insisted on showing Louis Vard and Père Goliot something of Paris before they returned to Brittany, and in four days he had reduced the old man to a state of crazy bewilderment at the many strange and wonderful sights he had seen, while Louis Vard had finally made up his mind that he had so far been wasting his life in Cour-des-Comptes, and that the only place in the world for an enterprising young man was Paris.

When he returned temporarily to Brittany, he carried with him my promise to hand Jeanne Thibaud the marriage portion which I had promised her that night in my room at her mother's house, on condition that the marriage took place within a month of that day.

For the best of reasons I could not fulfil my promise of dancing with Ma'm'selle at her wedding, but we promised to be there in any event, and Louis departed in a state of eager anticipation to arrange matters quietly with Madame Thibaud and to hurry on the happy day.

We went to the station to see our friends off, and Vaurel insisted on taking them all three down first class. For Boulot, handsomely arrayed in a new brass collar bristling with blunt spikes, and looking horribly ferocious, sat between his master's legs in spite of official regulations, and grinned superciliously at the functionaries who intimated from time to time that his proper place was in the dog-box forward.

A fortnight later we followed—Denise, Gaston and I. We journeyed by easy stages, stopping one night at Rennes, where black-browed Marie of the Hotel Jullien smilingly taxed me with leaving an unpaid bill and certain articles of luggage, both of which impeachments were true, but I had never once given either a thought since last I was there. When I explained to

her the reasons for my oversight, and she learned that the gentleman with me was the Colonel Gaston des Comptes, about whom the whole world was ringing, and that his sister was my wife, she permitted me to pay up arrears, and for the sake of my 'beautiful eyes' and my 'winsome leddie' took me into favour again.

When we reached Cour-des-Comptes next day the whole village, headed by Boulot and Vaurel and Louis Vard, met us at the station, and would, I think, have dragged the carriage all the way to the château, but that we feared for the springs, and preferred the less trying traction of the fat old horses.

Père Bonnatt was there too from Combourg, for I had written to him begging him to come over and assist at the wedding, and the good humour and jollity of his face were in themselves sufficient to ensure a right jovial time.

He stayed with us at the château and proved a very pleasant addition to our party. I can see again the merry twinkle of his black eyes as he was introduced by me to Denise.

'Yes,' he said, 'this is the young lady I meant. I see you met her at the station that day all right. I was afraid you had taken advantage of my indiscreet remark when I learned of her disappearance a week later.'

'How did the duchesse take it?' asked Denise, 'and poor Sister Cécile?'

'Ah! Sister Cécile! I believe she did have a succession of rather bad quarters of an hour. In fact, I am not sure that she has entirely finished with them yet.'

'Oh, that is too bad,' cried Denise. 'Can we do nothing for her?'

'Why, yes! Send her a present in money, which she will immediately hand over to the duchesse, who will at once admit her to favour again, and peace and happiness will reign in the dovecote once more.'

'It shall be done at once,' said Denise. 'Poor Sister Cécile!'

CHAPTER XXX

THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Our own wedding had been of the hastiest. We made up for it in the enjoyment of the wedding of our two good friends, Jeanne Thibaud and Louis Vard, and Denise entered into it with all the exuberance of enjoyment which most girls find greater vent for in other people's weddings than they found room for in their own.

In my lack of understanding I had suggested that the merry-makings should take place at the château, and I supposed that the proposal would be considered a flattering one to our friends. But Denise, who knew her people, negatived it at once.

'It wouldn't do for a moment,' she said. 'They wouldn't enjoy themselves the least little bit. They would try to be on their good behaviour and all the fun would be gone. There is only one place to dance in at a Breton wedding and that's in a barn, and we'll have the biggest barn up at La Garaye, and you shall see them dance till they can't stand. Oh, it's a great time a wedding, I assure you. Unless you have it on a ship,' she added mischievously, 'and have to be married in somebody else's clothes, which is not exactly the very pleasantest kind of wedding I know.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I felt very sorry for you. Next time you shall have it in a barn.'

The following day the whole village streamed away over to Bessancy, and Jeanne and Louis were duly married in the church there, and Père Bonnatt helped to tie the knot tight.

Vaurel was there quite '*en grand seigneur*,' in the new clothes which he had bought in Paris at the sign of 'Old England.' And old man Goliot was there in the new clothes which Vaurel had bought for him at the same place. He was still in a state of great ex-

citement over his Parisian experiences, and found it difficult to settle down to the humdrum life of Courdes-Comptes, but Vaurel was looking after him.

And Boulot was there, in his new brass collar with the blunt spikes, and a big white cotton bow tied on the back of his neck, to counteract in some degree the militant look of the collar, and to bring him into line with the festivity of the occasion.

His sheepishly knowing look as he sat on his stump in the church porch, with his head hanging forward between his shoulders, and the big cotton bow cocking up behind, set us all laughing, and he wrinkled up his nose at us, and sneezed furiously three times, and then rolled desperately on his back and kicked and wriggled vigorously in a vain attempt to get rid of his decoration. Then he got up, and sat down again despondently, and said as plainly as words, 'I just did that to show you that I didn't put that silly thing on myself. It's that dear old fool Prudent tied it on. You must excuse him; he's been a little bit off his head since I took him round the world and up to Paris. But he'll come round all right in time if you leave him alone. He's the best-hearted fellow in the world, you know, but he's a bit raised just now. However, I'm looking after him, so you don't need to worry yourselves.'

During the ceremony we heard a loud sneeze which was very familiar to us, and here was Boulot, tired of waiting outside, coming sauntering up the aisle. He looked round on us all with extreme deliberation, winked as his eye caught mine, wagged his stump at sight of Louis and Jeanne kneeling by the railings, then smiled knowingly, and sat down alongside them, and surveyed the proceedings with all the grace of a heavy uncle, and sneezed again at the incense, of which he disapproved.

The chorister boy who was waving the censer was a little rascally, and gave him a special whiff all to

himself, which started him sneezing more violently than ever. Then two priests looked at him, Father Bonnatt's eyes twinkled merrily, and he leered benevolently back at them, just as the heavy uncle might have done had he been slightly uplifted with the hilarity of the occasion. A verger in a cloak hurried up carrying a long wand. Boulot sneezed and smiled, and I could almost hear him say,—

'Well, old cock, what part of the show are you, and how much longer is all this nonsense going to last? Say, tell that little boy in the long shirt that if he throws any more of that stinking stuff at me I'll come through and bite a piece out of his leg. Some folks may like it, but—a-ti-shoo!—a-ti-shoo!—a-ti-shoo!—it gets up my nose and makes me sneeze. Want a word with me, do you, old boy? All right, what is it?' and he took a heavy step or two towards the verger, smiling with his eye-teeth all the time, and the verger, as soon as he saw him in motion, thought better of it, and beat a rapid retreat down the aisle.

However, the ceremony got through all right, and Boulot led us all back to Cour-des-Comptes in triumph, Denise and Jeanne in the family carriage and the rest of us on foot. Such a gay company of broad-brimmed beavers and handsomely-smocked blouses, and snowy flapping headgear, and swinging short blue skirts and neat ankles, and seamed and weather-lanned old faces, and young faces like rosy apples, and joyous voices that called to and fro and shrieked with laughter at infinitesimal jokes.

And so along the dappled high road, with the poplars waving and shimmering on each side of it, and through the green fields to the big barn at La Garaye, where the long trestle tables were groaning beneath the weight of a mighty feast.

Here Denise bade them all wait while she went inside to see that everything was right, and they gathered round Louis and Jeanne, and joked and

chaffed them to their hearts' content with a humour as broad as it was homely, and if, now and again, their sallies brought the colour into the bride's cheeks, it was all part of the fun of the day, and only what you have to expect when you get married in Cour-des-Comptes.

Then Denise pushed open the great swinging doors, and they all flocked in out of the spring sunshine, and rushed for the tables like so many children, exclaiming aloud at the quality and quantity of the fare.

Jeanne and Louis occupied the places of honour, of course, and on the table in front of Jeanne was a plate covered by another plate upside down.

She removed the top plate to make way for something better, and then gave a little startled cry which turned all their neighbour's faces towards her, while Denise's eyes sparkled like jewels.

'What is it, then? what is it?' asked those who could not see.

And Jeanne, in an awestruck whisper, murmured,—
'Mille francs!'

And Louis turned over the notes one by one, and counted them aloud up to ten, and announced in a proud voice, 'Ten thousand francs!' and a hum of amazement ran round the tables, and broke out into exclamations: 'Thousand thunders!' 'Heavens!' 'Dame!' 'Dieu de Dieu!' and many more.

'The luck has come to Cour-des-Comptes,' cried one; 'we'll all be *rentiers* soon.'

'Now we've got Monsieur Gaston and Ma'm'selle back,' said another.

And Jeanne, recovering from her surprise, remembered all about it, and leaned forward with swimming eyes and nodded her grateful thanks to me.

Those at the further ends of the tables came crowding round to look at more money than most of them had ever seen all at one time in their lives, and then went back to their places buzzing excitedly, so that

they could hardly eat until they began, and then they all made wondrous play on the good things in front of them, till it seemed to me that they could not possibly dance, for some hours to come at all events.

But as soon as they were all satisfied, the tables were struck, all except one at the far end of the barn, on to which three chairs were hoisted, and three great mugs of cider, and three important gentlemen seated themselves in the chairs and began torturing their fiddles into tune. And all the company joined hands in two long lines that ran from end to end of the barn, and then, having arrived at an understanding among themselves, the fiddles dashed headlong into a racketing country dance, and the wavering lines of stiff blue blouses, snowy starched headgear, and swirling skirts, and laughing faces, swept together and then retreated, back and forth, any steps you like and the more the merrier, back and forth, stamp and kick, shout the tune, clasp your partner or anybody else's, twirl her round, hands again, back and forth, laugh and shout, forget yesterday, never mind to-morrow, you're dancing at Jeanne Thibaud's wedding, and the business of life at the moment is to dance and laugh and shout and be as merry as you may.

'Ten thousand francs! *Nom de Dieu!* ten thousand francs!'

'Well, she's a fine girl is Jeanne, and Louis is *bon garçon*—so we'll dance like the devil to show them what we think of them.'

'Bravo, bravo, M. le Curé! It's monsieur has an eye for a pretty girl yet. In the olden time, Jeanne—'

'Ah, foolish, those times are gone! *A bas les aristocrats!* Now we are men and we have our rights.'

'Dance, *cochon*, dance! faster or thy clumsy hoofs will block the way.'

'*Tiens!* Ma'm'selle is not dancing!'

'Simpleton! of course not, don't you understand—'
Denise sat in the corner by the fiddler's table, and

laughed and clapped and cheered us all to greater and greater exertions, till the blue blouses lost their stiffness, and the white headgear flapped limply round red, hot, panting faces; and some dropped out, and the *chopines* of cider began to circulate; and some danced on as though their legs were made of steel, and sang the louder to make up for the rest. Among these—Vaurel and Louis Vard. Vaurel with his armless sleeve broken loose and flapping wildly, except when his partner on that side grasped it merrily in lieu of a hand, his sunny face and big blue eyes all on fire, his voice peeling out like a jerky trumpet, every little bit of him dancing for all he was worth; and Louis Vard keeping up with him to the very last kick because he wasn't going to be beaten at his own wedding by any man alive, much less by a man with only one arm, even though he had been round the world.

Boulot lay on the edge of Denise's skirt, with his head on his paws, and viewed the proceedings with the contemptuous toleration of a philosopher whose creed it was to rest awhile after a good dinner. Whenever his master whirled into his neighbourhood he wrinkled up his brows as who would say, 'That's mine—that one with the flapping sleeve. He's not really crazy, you know. He's the best fellow in the world, but he's a bit excited just now. He'll be all right to-morrow. I'm keeping an eye on him.'

Old Father Goliot attracted much attention by insisting on showing his untravelled friends how they danced in Paris, and his attempts at imitation of the antics of the Moulin Rouge were received with shouts of laughter, and how his stiff old joints would feel about it next day I did not dare to think.

Père Bonnatt won all their hearts by footing it with the best of them. He too was of the soil, and his youth came back as he danced.

I caught Denise's eyes following Gaston with a great glad light in them, and when they fell on mine

own common enjoyment with
 they family snapped with
 to see him dancing away
 For it did our hearts good
 abandon of a child among
 among the rest with all the
 gotten and with never a
 his own people, the past for
 thought for the future.

Thérèse's wedding gown
 They talk still of Jeanne
 still marvel at the ten
 at Cour-des-Comptes, and
 in her plate
 thousand francs she found
 that was something like a
—c'est mon âme Dieu! Thérèse
 know. *Mon Dieu!* did you
 wedding present, don't you
 in those terms!
 get married twice a week or
 every day one meets an
 All mon beau, it is not
 hand and there is only
 Englishman with so open a
 one Ma'm'selle.'

y one Ma'm'selle. There is only
 It is true! There is only
 our memory sweet at Court
 That is how they keep out
 des-Comptes.

d then they lighted candles
 They danced in dusk, and
 the night. But when the
 and danced on far into the
 stole away and strolled
 others

Up on the Clyde there is a broad-spread, one-storeyed house built of red sandstone, with deep verandahs, nestling among the trees almost opposite the Cloch, which knows us at times in the early summer, when the air is sweet and bracing and the hills are flushing with the heather. But the autumn finds us among the greens and golds and the fiery reds and lovely russet-browns of Cour-des-Comptes, among our own people, in our other home.

And once and again there comes upon me the recollection of that curdling night when crazy Roussel got into the house and struck panic into the stout heart of Prudent Vaurel and valiant Boulot and myself. And the door of the little room at the end of the passage discomforts me at times with the remembrance of the dumb bedevilment that once lay behind it.

And then the great hall rings with the patter of tiny feet, and merry peals of childish laughter scatter the ghosts of the past, and Boulot bursts into the room to greet his old friends while his new ones hang on to him by tail and collar—the tail that still looks like a rusty iron spike—the collar he wore at Jeanne Thibaud's wedding. And behind him comes his master, beaming welcome from every hair of his sunny face, and stands before my wife and says again in a voice of loving reverence, 'Ma'm'selle!' just exactly as he did the day when first I made her acquaintance in front of his little stone house by the river.

For to her own people who love her so dearly she will always be Ma'm'selle, though she live to be one hundred and ten, as our good friend Prudent would say, and me who love her most dearly of all, though our journey should run beyond the allotted span, we travel hand in hand and heart to heart, and to me too she will always be Ma'm'selle, and she will never be more than twenty years old.

